

THE GIFT OF CHOICE

Easter 5 – Cycle B: 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

What beautiful readings we have this morning to undergird our vote on the two full inclusion motions from the 2011 National Convention.

The First Reading recounts an incident which results in the baptism of, presumably, the first Ethiopian Christian. What is interesting is that although Philip is essential to the conversion of the traveller, Luke's poetic description of how the two men came upon one another suggests divine intervention. Left to his own devices, Philip would not have taken the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. And then, if it had been up to Philip, Luke suggests, Philip would not have walked over to the man's chariot to begin the dialogue that results in the Ethiopian's baptism. Today, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has slightly over 32 million members; and the Protestant churches in Ethiopia, the largest of which is the Lutheran Mekane Jesus, have 13.7 million members. I love that the Holy Spirit figures prominently in this story, because it reminds us that the Holy Spirit works through people. We pray that for ourselves today – and every day, really; that God's Spirit will call us where we can serve others in the name of Christ; that God's Spirit will call us into relationships marked by God's grace.

Our Second Reading teaches us that love, as the author of 1 John understands and experiences it, is so deep and so transformative that it bespeaks the divine. After just a little dithering, he blurts out, "God is love." And as we read on, he proclaims that God's presence in the world is revealed in the sacrificial love of Christ Jesus, but also in our discipleship, when it is animated by that same quality of sacrificial love Jesus proclaimed, not only in his ministry, but also in his dying and rising.

Some have expressed fear that voting today will injure our congregation; that people on opposite sides of the questions will not be able to reconcile with one another; not be able to go the coffee hour at 11:30. To feel that way is to underestimate love. We are a loving congregation; we love and care for one another; there is a kind of covenant love that exists among us that averts broken relationships. Many times in our congregational life, we have had disagreements; but we find ways to cope with these things. We realize that we are a church, and being the church means that we love sacrificially and pro-actively, because that is precisely how God deals and has dealt with us. God loves us into salvation: that is the meaning of Christ's death on the cross. No escape clause; no last-minute rescue on Calvary. God in Christ goes the distance with us to proclaim the gospel. As Christ's church, we understand that we are called to love as he loved; and we recognize that sacrificial love is redemptive and life-giving. We can save people by loving them!

The gift of choice is precisely the gift proclaimed each Sunday in the sermon. Our vote today is cut from the same cloth. Some will vote one way; some will vote the other. God's comes to us wherever we are and works with whatever gifts and strengths we have to build up the community of faith. God calls us to do the same in our relationships with one another. To be gentle as God is gentle; to be gracious as God is gracious; to forgive one another as God forgives us; to journey on together in faith, trusting that God's love is perfected in us when we love with the same love we have received.

Christ is the vine and we are the branches. By we, I mean we, the church: we are only joined to Christ the vine as we form the church. And we are bearing fruit today, simply by tackling these challenging questions. Taking the step of a congregational vote indicates that our faith in God is alive, that the gospel is alive, that we abide in Christ and that Christ abides in us; we are a fruit-bearing branch. But you have probably noticed in today's Gospel that fruit-bearing branches are the ones that are pruned by the vine-grower. Our vote is the pruning: it hurts; our long growth-spurt, our momentum as a congregation has been temporarily disrupted as we have taken time apart to consider the questions on which we are to vote. But that is what discipleship looks like: every once in a while we need to stop action and reflect and consider the new call. It's part of the gift of choice. It's very much part of the life of discipleship.

Now as your pastor, you need to know that I intend to practise what I preach. No matter which way the vote goes, whether we become a full-inclusion congregation or whether we preserve the *status quo* of being a welcoming congregation, I will continue loving you as I have loved you for the past eighteen years. You have struggled with these questions (as I have, by the way) and that's all any pastor can ask

in assessing the effectiveness of his or her ministry, in determining the spiritual health of the faith community. My call is not on the line here, and I would ask that you not put your membership in this congregation on the line here either. We have been called into this congregation as the people of God in Christ, and everything that was true about this congregation yesterday will still be true of it tomorrow. The results of the vote are our results, and they only tell us who we are as the people of God in Christ Jesus. There is no political shift as a result of this vote, only a better understanding of who we are, and who we have been for some time, by the way.

God, of course, considers us works-in-progress, and won't leave us alone for long. *Ekklesia semper reformanda*: "the called-out people always reforming" – that's the Lutheran heritage. But Luther knew, and we know that it is the gospel of Jesus Christ that reforms us, not our vote today.

May the Holy Spirit be present with us as we respond to the call of our Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada to use for Christ Church, Waterloo, the gift of choice.