

## INTEGRITY IN MISSION

### Easter 5, Year B: Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:7-12; John 15:1-8

I'm quite fond of the word "integrity," because for me, it's a word with depth. It comes from the same root as the word "integrated," suggesting that the parts of something fit together so beautifully and with such mutuality that they complete one another to, in turn, produce something of excellence, greater than themselves.

Most often we use the word "integrity" to describe a *person* whose moral values have been tested and found to be solid. It is not a stretch to say that such a person is whole, that he or she is consistent, honest, principled, and dependable. Flaws in character, weaknesses in a person's constituent qualities, are not readily found in a person of integrity: people of integrity have an inner compass, it seems, that keeps them from crossing boundaries, taking unfair advantage over another, or succumbing to temptation. They are people whose moral values guide their actions, people who recognize their individual responsibility in community, people who do not allow personal gain to overrule the common good. And so for me, the integration of a person of integrity is known and understood in that lovely mix of the internal and external, the individual and shared, the personal and communal. People of integrity are the same people behind closed doors as they are in public. "Integrity" and "integration" speak to me with the same voice.

And so, when I propose that we, as a congregation, have "integrity in mission," I am suggesting all of these nuances of meaning in the phrase; that our life together and the work we undertake as the people of God in Christ Jesus is of a piece; that our faith and practice be one proclamation. Integrity in mission.

There are lovely images in today's readings which, I believe, speak to the integrity, the *integration* of the life of discipleship and mission.

The author of 1 John writes eloquently of his understanding that the essence of God is love. God's love was shown primarily in the saving work of Jesus, and that those who follow Jesus in discipleship love because God first loved us in Christ Jesus, loved us through his birth, life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection. And it is this same author who identifies our integrity as disciples and as children of God with the love we reflect back toward God and toward Jesus through loving our neighbour. We love God by loving our neighbour, he teaches.

But he doesn't leave it there: he remembers the quality of love we have received as sacrificial, and calls his congregation to love *all people*, sisters and brothers, many of whom they might not find that loveable! Sacrificial love doesn't take account of a person's loveable quotient, only a person's need of love and God's need to found a community, ideally a worldwide community, of love. It is only through love, the apostle continues to proclaim, that the communal dimension of discipleship is enjoyed. "If we love one another," he writes, "God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." The integrity of our relationship with God relates to how well we love.

Mission is what follows our discipleship in Christ Jesus – which means that our mission has integrity only when it is led by (you guessed it) "love." Love leading our hunger for justice for our sister and brother; love leading our action and advocacy for the sake of our sister and brother's wellbeing; love leading our welcome so that everyone is included, especially those in need of incorporation into a loving community.

The Ethiopian eunuch in today's First Reading was one such person. We might think that being a court official of the Candace or being so highly positioned that he was in charge of her entire treasury would open doors that would be closed to ordinary people. Not so! There is a prohibition in Jewish law against eunuchs being included in the worshipping community. In spite of the prophet Isaiah's vision that in the new Israel such exclusion would not continue, it did; and this man was an Ethiopian to boot – someone considered to have come from pretty much the end of the earth. Otherness and strangeness would only add reasons for people to keep their distance.

And so, this is no insignificant meeting that Philip has. What we see in the conversation, the teaching, and eventually the baptism of the man from Ethiopia is the radical welcome the early Christian community was able to provide for people who were not welcome in the Jewish community, even though this man was

Jewish! And next week, we shall see that welcome extended as Peter travels to Joppa to baptize a Roman centurion, a Gentile, and his whole Gentile household. This is integrity in mission, when that love taught by Jesus, recognized by the author of I John, and embodied by disciples such as Philip and Peter takes down barriers and opens the Christian community to all people. It's astounding, really, to see such radical love so plainly, so conspicuously leading mission. I've mentioned before that the church in Ethiopia, Mekane Yesus, looks to this event in Jerusalem, some 2,000 years ago, as foundational.

John the Evangelist provides a unique teaching of Jesus in this morning's Gospel that describes the integration of Jesus' disciples with Jesus. Jesus says, "I am the true vine, ... my Father is the vine grower, and you are the branches..." It is an image Jesus' disciples and John's congregation might have remembered from Scripture. The people of Israel are the vineyard in the book of the prophet Isaiah, but it is not a happy outcome. Israel's relationship with God is secondary to their desire to be a strong and influential nation, much of their nationalistic striving done on the backs of those with very little or nothing. Isaiah sees the *lack of integrity* of this desire, especially in light of the gift of God's law, and notes that the fruit of the vines is wild, not cultivated, grapes. The fall of Israel and Judah and the dispersion of the people from their homeland to other countries is interpreted by Isaiah as God's action against them, breaking down the walls of the vineyard, allowing it to become overgrown with briars and thorns, and finally seeing it turn into desert for lack of rain, lack of blessing from God.

This image is the backdrop for Jesus' claim as the "*true vine*" in which the branches must abide. "I am the vine, you are the branches... Abide in me as I abide in you... The branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine." Integrity in discipleship, integrity in mission is what Jesus is describing; discipleship and mission that are informed and animated by nothing less than the person and the gospel of Jesus Christ!

I think that it was the Marynissen Winery in Niagara-on-the-Lake that first brought French varietals to Canada and grafted them to the vines of the Concord grapes that Canada was famous for growing in the mid-twentieth century. It is an amazing story when we realize how relatively quickly Ontario wine became world-class after such humble beginnings. What is interesting is that the transformation of Niagara's wineries is precisely the image Jesus uses in today's Gospel: the branches must abide in the vine in order to bear fruit. The Concord vine with its root extending deep to the water table of the Niagara peninsula, was more than able to support the branches John and Nanny Marynissen brought from France and then Germany in 1975 and the years following. The Marynissen Winery produced Ontario's first Chardonnay, Gewurztraminer, Riesling, Merlot and Gamay Noir wine using the roots of the Concord grape. And the rest, as they say, is history, because many others followed suit, and continue to do so.

But all that pruning and cutting away and dressing of the vines that Jesus uses as a metaphor for the cutting edge of the gospel, the word, is so important for there to be an abundant harvest – of grapes, and of lives and communities transformed by Jesus' words of life!

Integrity in discipleship; integrity in mission.

I doubt that I've ever told you that I think that Pastor Roy Grosz's choice of "Christ" as the name for this congregation was inspired, perhaps divinely inspired. I can't think of a clearer statement of the theology of incarnation than giving a people, a community, the name of Christ. Whose are we? Christ's. Who are we? Christ for others. And when our mission looks inward and we take missteps on the path of discipleship, remembering whose we are and by whose name we are called stands as a corrective.

I was tempted by the occasion to go down memory lane this morning and do a retrospective of our 21 years together; but quite honestly, I don't think that a living church is called to look back and indulge itself in nostalgia and sentimentality. Yes, God's grace is undeniable as we reflect on our past and present; and we do give thanks for all that we have received, not only during the past 21 years, but during the whole 48 years of our history. But it is the present and the future into which Christ calls his disciples. There's the corrective that we need, every time we are tempted to look back, instead of take account of where we are and peer ahead to where we must go!

And so the gifts we receive today from both the grace of this anniversary and the proclamation of Holy Scripture are questions relating to the integrity of our mission: "How are we loving our neighbour? What are we doing, in other words, that's making a difference for people in our immediate community and in the

world? Are we truly welcoming strangers into our congregational community? Are we faithful to the person and proclamation of Jesus Christ, so much so that we can say we are branches of the true vine? And finally, is there *sufficient* integrity in our mission for others that Christ is truly present in this time and place?

These are *our* questions – questions to keep asking and questions to celebrate – for a much longer period than 21 or 48 years. We thank God for such questions because they are living questions for a living church; and they fashion our integrity in mission.