

MAY 10, 2009
EASTER 5
MOTHER'S DAY & RIC SUNDAY
"WHAT IS TO PREVENT?"

In the words of the third verse of today's Hymn of the Day, let us pray:

*Mothering Spirit, nurt'ring one,
In arms of patience hold me close,
So that in faith I root and grow
Until I flow'r, until I know.*

I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen!

Throughout this Easter season our first readings have all been taken from volume II of St. Luke's writings known as "The Acts of the Apostles." Week in and week out we've been led through a series of stories in which the Spirit of God is depicted as wafting our earliest Christian forbears into ever new situations and presenting them with ever more challenging opportunities to "practice resurrection" in circumstances

increasingly remote from the old orthodoxy centered in Jerusalem.

The Spirit in today's reading from Acts 8 gusts the mission of the church toward opening up new frontiers of the Gospel on a number of fronts. It breaks new ground geographically, racially, and sexually. The story is one of my all-time favorites and is one of the most exotic and picturesque in all of scripture. The last time we encountered this text I carefully detailed for you the seven highly descriptive adjectival phrases that Luke employs in describing the "Ethiopian eunuch, court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury" who "had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, reading the prophet Isaiah."

Perhaps you'll remember how I drew your attention to the fact that of all these colorful descriptives of the man whom the Spirit leads Philip to encounter on the road

to Gaza, the one Luke chooses to use to identify the man with is the fact that he is a **eunuch** which means, bluntly, a castrated male, castration being an all too common practice in the ancient world thought to guarantee the trustworthiness of a male slave put in charge of a nobleman's women and other valuable possessions.

Having had the privilege to meet not one or two but five Ethiopians in Augsburg on my recent trip, all members of the fastest growing Lutheran church in the world that will soon become the largest Lutheran church in the world—the Mekane Jesus Church, it's called—all of these very impressive and well-educated theologians—I might've thought Luke might simply refer to the man as “the Ethiopian” or maybe even the “Queen's treasurer.” But Luke chooses the man's sexual status as his “identifier.”

My theory as to why this might be has long been that Luke was likely interested in

high-lighting his sexual condition as one of the traditional **disqualifiers**—reasons for exclusion—from the covenant worship community of Israel, according to Torah in Deuteronomy 23:1—an exclusion which is utterly overturned and transformed into a declaration of welcome in Isaiah 56, just a short turn of the scroll, later than Isaiah 53 which Luke tells us the eunuch was reading. Remember how the story continues with Philip asking the eunuch (with what I can't help but hear in a rather condescending tone of voice), “*Do you understand what you are reading?*” To which the eunuch replies without taking offense, “*How can I, unless someone guides me?*” —a response that gives Philip the opening he needs to join the man in his chariot and read with him the scroll of the prophet, while proclaiming to him the “*good news about Jesus.*” I always think it must have been a pretty bizarre scene, as Luke paints it, for the occasional camel driver passing by, though maybe no

stranger than the sight of Philip dunking the eunuch in a nearby pool of water in response to the man's query, "*What is to prevent me from being baptized?*"

Now that's a good question—a God question—that Luke clearly wants us to answer with Philip, "Nothing! Nothing is to prevent." This is the answer to which the Gospel leads, as we employ with Philip and with Jesus, as we heard a couple of weeks ago, the strategy of using the Gospel to "open the minds" of readers and hearers to the truth of Scripture—the task of evangelism now as then. The welcome of eunuchs into the faith community is not the issue on the frontier of the church's mission with sexual minorities in our day. But we know what is.

This is truly a wonderfully liberating text of Gospel good news for us to hear on this Mother's Day which also happens to be the day on which we celebrate RIC Sunday, our commitment as a congregation to publicly

and proudly identify ourselves as a community of faith that, because of our commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ **and** our understanding of Scripture, are convinced that we are called to welcome all people into our community of the baptized, naming especially those who have felt excluded by the church for reasons of sexual orientation. Today I'm happy to announce that the Board of Directors of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary has formally declared itself to be an RIC Seminary—the first of our 8 ELC seminaries to do so. Of course, it seems almost silly that the seminary should finally be making this formal declaration more than thirty years after a group of us San Francisco pastors made our public declaration of the need for the larger church to make such a welcome. PLTS has long been a welcoming place for glbt students and its faculty and staff strong advocates around this issue in the church. But still, now just a few months away from

the possible action of our churchwide assembly which meets in Minneapolis in August to vote on the church's acceptance of committed relationships between people of the same sex including the ordination of pastors — with all the turmoil that's expected to follow if the vote passes — it's a wonderful time for our westcoast seminary to be “coming out of the closet” as an RIC seminary. “After prayerful contemplation and deliberate consultation with the seminary community, including graduates, friends, students, faculty and staff, the Board of Directors of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary voted to affirm the following welcoming statement: *“Welcome to PLTS, a seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, a faith and learning community dedicated to excellence in theological education for developing leaders for the church in the world. Our beautiful location, dynamic faculty, cutting-edge curriculum, closely-knit community and*

membership in the Graduate Theological Union, provide a unique setting for engaging issues of Christian faith, discipleship, and the communication of the gospel to a world in need to truly good news.

Now finally getting to the point, the statement further affirms that *PLTS is an inclusive community and offers hospitality to all who participate in our programs of study. As disciples of Christ committed to public leadership among God's people in diverse and challenging cultural contexts, we eagerly learn from and welcome one another's diversity, including but not limited to, theological perspective, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender identity, relationship status, age, physical ability, social and economic status and sexual orientation.*"

Commenting on the statement, PLTS President Phyllis Anderson said, "*Joining this program is consistent with our vision statement: 'Led by the light of Christ, PLTS*

is called to embody the Church's bold and effective engagement with vital issues in an inter-faith and multi-cultural context with a strong Lutheran voice.” And PLTS Board Chair Gary Andeen, is quoted as saying: *“The PLTS community has been quietly living and learning together faithfully in the midst of the church's disagreements about sexual orientation for a long time. With this decision, PLTS will now be living openly with that faithful disagreement. Please join the seminary in praying that this community's tolerance for one another's opinions will be as sincere and loving in the future as it has been in the past.”*

Truly there is a sea-change going on in our society over issues involving people of same sex orientation—especially when states like Iowa and Maine and New Hampshire have or are preparing to take giant steps on these issues when even the likes of us “cutting edge” places like California have endured set-backs along the

way. It's sad to me who's been involved with this issue for my entire ministry that the church itself has proven to be so much more a part of the problem than the solution, although I must hasten to say that some of my most profound and moving experiences of the "church" through the years have been precisely among those working in the church for change on this issue—as well as others—over the years.

Nor do I want to give the impression that this is a "done deal" and that we can sit back expecting that the current tide of change is irreversible. I'm enough of a historian to be a skeptic about the notion of "progress" being inevitable. And so I'm not optimistic but **hopeful** in the genuinely biblical sense, confident that ours is a righteous God who is the source and mover of all real and enduring justice in our world—for which we, the church, the body of Christ in the world, are called to work and pray and struggle.

“Beloved,” our second reading from the first letter of John begins, *“let us love one another, because love is from God....since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another....there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts our fear...the commandment we have from God is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters.”*

Or as Jesus puts it in our Gospel reading from John: *“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”* *“My father,”* Jesus concludes, meaning not Joseph but his Abba God—a God whom Jesus might just as well have called *“Imma”*—mamma—except that place was taken by his mother named *“Mary”*—My fathering and mothering God, Jesus meant, is glorified by this—is made happier than any doting Jewish parent ever could be—*“that you bear much fruit and become*

my disciples.” On this RIC Sunday it’s good to know, not that the chickens of liberalism and society’s permissiveness have come home to roost in the church, which some among us fear. Rather it’s good news, on this RIC Sunday 2009, to know that these long years of labor are finally close to bearing some fruit.

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Amen.