

Immersed

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May 3, 2015

Acts 8:26-40

I John 4:7-21

I.

For two thousand years or three, people of faith have had a fundamental disagreement over who God is, what is holy and what it means to live faithfully. In the years of the early church, we were as busy disagreeing as we are today.

That disagreement is a conflict between fear and love. On the ones side, some teach that God is a wrathful judge, an angry King. And if we are to be saved, it is only because of the last-minute intercession of Jesus, and in addition because we are chosen, and in addition because we say the right words and believe the right things in our hearts. And in addition because we don't make too many mistakes. But woe betide us if we get anything in the formula wrong.

On the other side, some take our cue from a different understanding of God, a starting place just as biblical—or more so—than the other. To quote again from the First Letter of John, “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment.... We love, because [God] first loved us.”

You and I are living in a time when the debate has reached a fever pitch. The approach that says God is a capricious powerful ruler or a hanging judge has never loomed larger, and the approach of trying to scare people into salvation is as

popular as ever. Often this is strangely allied with a prosperity gospel that teaches that those who have a lot of wealth are the favored of God!

And yet there is also an approach that says Power is not God, and Wrath is not God and Wealth is not God, for that matter. God is...Love. Pure, unadulterated Love.

II.

One of my favorite stories in the New Testament is the encounter between Philip the Evangelist and the Ethiopian official in his stretch limo...I mean Chariot. I love this story because every time I read it I find something new. It is perhaps the earliest documentation of an African becoming an early follower of Christ, for one thing. And the Ethiopian is a eunuch, who may have been either Jewish or non-Jewish, on his way back from Jerusalem, where he was on a pilgrimage.

In those days the status of a eunuch – and being rendered unable to have children before they were twelve was not uncommon for court officials—eunuchs were part of a suspect sexual minority. Eunuchs might have been trusted by the queen, but they were considered immoral by others—they were “different.” Technically ancient rules in Israel’s scripture said eunuchs weren’t allowed in the inner part of the temple! We don’t know too much about how they were treated, but it seems likely that Jews were as divided then about sexual minorities as Christians are today.

Now in this story Philip gets moved by the Spirit of God and goes running up and overhears this Ethiopian VIP reading out loud from the book of Isaiah. It is interesting that the eunuch is reading from the book of Isaiah, because within

Judaism, Isaiah was the leading text proclaiming liberation for the captive and the ability of all the peoples of the world someday to come to the temple on God's mountain—including specifically Ethiopians...and eunuchs. Now back in that day we don't find a lot of talk of LGBTQ. The words Gay and Lesbian did not exist. But let me assure you the eunuch was someplace between T and Q. And the book of Isaiah offers acceptance to the foreigner, the outcast, and to Q. Isaiah chapter 56, says

³ Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,

‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people’;

and do not let the eunuch say,

‘I am just a dry tree.’

⁴ For thus says the Lord:

To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,

who choose the things that please me

and hold fast my covenant,

⁵ I will give, in my house and within my walls,

a monument and a name

better than sons and daughters;

I will give them an everlasting name

that shall not be cut off.

⁶ And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,

to minister to him, to love the name of the Holy One,

and to be God's servants,

all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it,

and hold fast my covenant—

⁷ these I will bring to my holy mountain,

and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.

⁸ Thus says the Lord God,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered.

The passage the Ethiopian is reading aloud is actually three chapters earlier, where it talks about a mysterious someone who has suffered unjustly, humiliated for no good reason...clearly puzzled and intrigued, he asks Philip, was this a word about the prophet “or someone else?” As Philip begins to speak with him, about the unjust suffering and humiliation of Jesus, the Ethiopian spots water along the road—“Look here is water, what is to prevent me from being baptized?” It is a loaded question. And Philip, Philip asks no questions, he has no problem—absolutely nothing is to prevent the Ethiopian from being baptized. He immerses his new friend not just in water, but in the Love which is God. Then Philip, carried away by the same wind of God that brought him here, is gone.

III.

You and I live in a time when we like to talk as though we accept difference, as though racism is yesterday’s problem, as though wealth and class, race and gender and orientation mean nothing in our free society. But some preachers are still spewing hate, and other talking prosperity, and some not saying much at all,

while incidents of violence continue that indicate that as a society we still do not get it! Love is God, and Love casts out fear, and we are called to love, not hate.

These days we mourn yet more unexplained deaths of black men in the custody of uniformed law officers, Dontay Ivy, and Freddie Gray join the awful list, and we try to make sense of the response of looting and violence in Baltimore, even as we give thanks for the far more widespread response of peaceful protest. In the midst of it I remember the words in I John: “Those who say , “I love God”, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen.”

At the heart of so much of our violence and hatred as a society is sheer fear—fear of difference; fear of poverty; fear of those who look different from us, or speak a different language. It is the role of judges and attorneys and police departments to assure that justice is served equally regardless of some one’s place in society—and that abuses of power are addressed, with due regard for the rights of both accused and victim. But it is the role of people of faith, people like you and me, to start asking some hard questions about our underlying attitudes, about the deep divides among us, and look for some real answers about how things can change. If indeed God is Love—and yes God Is Love, we insist-- what is our role in seeking justice—and real acceptance and inclusion, in our neighborhoods, our cities, our nation, our world? What would peace with justice look like in our land?

We don’t claim to have any easy answers! But we look to Philip, ready to be carried by the Spirit of Love into extraordinary conversation friendship that breaks through the fences and dividing lines, running up to the limo, engaging in conversation with an unlikely brother.

We look to an Ethiopian from long ago, ready to take a chance, and be immersed by a stranger in the waters of Love, when it might be easier to go home resentful. We remember the words of John's letter, reminding us that real love is love in action, real love refuses to run over people, real love insists on a degree of respect and friendship and care for every human being.

We look forward to a day—we insist on living our lives in working toward the day-- when no one is considered a stranger, an outcast or an alien any more, but all flesh shall gather on the mountain of our God, and Love will at last cast out hatred and fear and the ways of death. And we will gather one humanity, gather with great joy, the beloved of God, who have learned to love, even as we have been loved. For God is love.