

Fifth Weekend of Easter (RCL/B): "An Astronaut, a Deacon, a Eunuch and Us"

Acts 8:26-40; John 15:1-8

May 1-2, 2021

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Michael Collins, the "third man" of the Apollo 11 crew, died in Florida this past Wednesday. His name isn't as familiar as that of his fellow astronauts Buzz Aldrin and Neil Armstrong, but he had the very important job of piloting the spacecraft Columbia and circling the moon as Aldrin and Armstrong took the lunar module down to the moon's surface. I was almost startled to see his obituary in the news, because I'd been preparing this weekend's homily and had just come upon a story published in *Guidedposts* years ago, about that moonshot, Buzz Aldrin and today's Gospel.

Buzz Aldrin was an elder in his Presbyterian church in Texas. He asked his pastor to allow him to take Holy Communion into space with him. He got the go-ahead and Aldrin transported 1 Communion wafer and a small vial of consecrated wine to the moon, where he did indeed commune.

Shortly after he and Armstrong landed the Lunar Module "Eagle" on the moon's surface, $\frac{1}{4}$ million miles from home, Aldrin transmitted this message back to Earth:

"This is the LM pilot. I'd like to take this opportunity to ask every person listening in, whoever and wherever they may be, to pause for a moment and contemplate the events of the past few hours and to give thanks in his or her own way."

Then he ended the radio transmission and read a verse from today's Gospel: "*I am the vine, you are the branches. Whosoever abides in me will bring forth much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing.*" (John 15:5) Aldrin had intended to read the verse from John over the radio, but was dissuaded by NASA personnel who didn't want to add fuel to the fire of the lawsuit Madelyn Murray O'Hare was pursuing to protest the fact that the Apollo 8 crew had read from Genesis while orbiting the moon at Christmas.

Being one of the first two people to walk on the moon could definitely give you a swelled head! But Aldrin chose to remember that we are all but branches, grafted onto the Christ Vine, and that without our Lord we can do nothing. But, oh, when we sink our roots into the soil of God-life, when we draw

living water from the wellspring of God's love, when we turn to God's grace to give us strength, when we abide, dwell, live in the Word and gratefully, joyfully, frequently receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion with our Savior and with each other, there is no end to the wonders God can perform! How many times have people of faith marveled, "Wonders never cease!" at the unexpected changes God has brought about, over the centuries and over the millennia??

Today's lesson from the Book of Acts is a great example. The Philip in this story is **not** the apostle Philip whom Jesus called (John 1). This Philip is one of seven deacons in the very early church, called to distribute food to the poor so the apostles could spend their time and energy teaching, preaching and healing. **But** after Stephen was stoned to death, there was brutal persecution of Christians in Jerusalem and everyone scattered elsewhere (except the apostles). The fact that Philip went to **Samaria** of all places is yet another reminder that "The sign of God is that we will be led where we did not plan to go." Samaria is where the hated **Samaritans** lived! Anybody would have thought they'd be **last** on the list to be evangelized! They were almost "worse" than Gentiles, because they were looked down on as half-breed Jews, "racially impure and religiously inferior."¹ But in his exile from Jerusalem, in his newly deployed status, Philip the deacon becomes Philip the evangelist. The Samaritans welcome the Good News about Jesus' saving life, death and resurrection. Their hearts are wide open to the Word of God and Philip baptizes them in droves, overcoming a very old and a very destructive prejudice.

I've got to believe that Philip was holding the Word of God close even when he wasn't preaching it, and that he was a man of prayer as well as of action. I say this because a) he was chosen for a position of authority in the Jerusalem Church and they were probably pretty picky about who their deacons were, and b) because he is **so** responsive to the Holy Spirit, so aware of and obedient to God's call in today's story about him and the Ethiopian eunuch.

An angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go,” and he get up and went! The Holy Spirit told him to go over to the chariot of somebody he’d never met and start talking to him, and he did! Then the Spirit of the Lord “snatched him away” (Acts 8:39) and once he landed again, Philip just picked up where he’d left off! The initial call to “Get up and go” was pretty odd, because Philip was directed to a seldom-used road in the middle of nowhere. But he did as he was told, and providentially bumped into this unusual and memorable fellow, the Ethiopian eunuch, treasurer for his queen, known as “the Candace.”

The man was interested enough in the Jewish religion to travel from far-away Ethiopia (current day Sudan) to Jerusalem on religious pilgrimage. But because of his physical deformity, because he was a eunuch, he couldn’t officially become a Jew. As he travels along in his chariot he’s reading the prophet Isaiah. That’s interesting, because it’s through Isaiah that the Lord predicts the day will come when Ethiopia honors him, and the Lord also promises that the day will come when eunuchs will leave behind their second-class citizenship and become a full part of the family of faith. Both those centuries’ old promises come true in this story from Acts, because of God’s faithfulness **and** because of Philip’s openness to the brand-new thing the Lord is doing.

It had been a big deal for Philip to baptize those hated Samaritans, and it’s also a big deal for him to baptize this foreigner with black skin and a physical deformity. He didn’t ask permission of any human authority to plow this new ground, because he was quite sure he was following the Spirit’s divine lead. That kind of chutzpah, that kind of freedom to do things differently, that kind of courage to risk censure, comes from being tight with the Lord! In our Wed. on-line noontime prayers we pray:

May we look upon others with Christ’s resurrection eyes,
 serve others with Christ’s loving touch,
 and know the Spirit’s well-being in the depths of our souls.²

Philip **did**. He related to folks in-the-moment. He didn’t let 800 years of acrimony, bitter and ancient history, to prejudice his relationship with the people of Samaria. He didn’t let the eunuch’s skin color or homeland or physical disfigurement detract from his incalculable value as a child of God.

“God so loved **the world** that God gave the only Son....” No qualifications, no limitations there; it doesn’t say “the world, except for Samaria, the world, except for Ethiopia, the world, except for people whom I consider strange or threatening because their religion or sexual orientation or citizenship status or skin color or political affiliation or level of self-sufficiency is different from mine.” The 1st letter of John reminds us,

*²⁰Those 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.
²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4)*

How can we ever get to that level of true, across-the-board acceptance, without staying connected to the Mother Ship? Remember that famous line, “The Eagle has landed”? The Eagle (the lunar module) and its occupants, Aldrin and Armstrong, would have been in a world of trouble without the spacecraft Columbia orbiting nearby, ready for them to dock, ready to take them back home again to Earth. And Columbia would have been in a world of trouble without NASA Mission Control back in Houston, doing everything necessary to make the mission a success, to bring the astronauts safely back home.

Remember the umbilical cord tethering the astronauts to the spacecraft during spacewalks? Christ is the umbilical cord, the Vine, tethering us to God and everything that is life-giving. Without connection to our Savior, we float away into nothingness. With Him, we experience the abundant life He came to give, and like Philip, we become a channel of life for others. As a reminder of that, let’s revisit our prayer of the day:

O God, you give us your Son as the vine apart from whom we cannot live. Nourish our life in his resurrection, that we may bear the fruit of love and know the fullness of your joy, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.
 Amen

¹*Interpretation*, p. 68.

²Ray Simpson, *Liturgies from Lindisfarne: Prayers and services for the pilgrimage of life* (Great Britain: Kevin Mayhew, 2010), p. 168.