

## Longing

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B; April 28, 2024

Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:24-30; 1 John 4: 7-21; John 15:1-8

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Priest in Charge

*In the name of God~ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.*

I want to share with you three stories. The first two are from one of my favorite books: “Take this bread”, by Sara Miles- this is her spiritual autobiography and these are true stories. Sara, whose upbringing had been completely secular, wanders into St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco in her forties and finds her life forever transformed by her first experience of sharing in the Eucharist. Her journey towards God and how holy community is gathered around feeding people awakens in her a longing- *a hunger*- to be baptized even though she feels, in her own words, “unprepared and scared.” She reaches out to one of the priests at St. Gregory's who asks her “what is the first line in the

baptismal vows in the prayer book?”- and it is, of course, “Do you desire to be baptized?” “Honey”, Mother Lynn says to her, “All you have to do is want it.” And Sara says, *“I wanted it so much.”*

Sara’s conviction that God gathers God’s people into relationship through feeding them- both in the Eucharist and in the food we need to survive- calls her to establish a food pantry at St. Gregory’s, which is located near some of the poorest neighborhoods in San Francisco. A few years after her own baptism, she is unloading groceries near their baptismal font when she sees a little girl, Sasha, whose family is a regular at the pantry. Sara greets her and offers her a snack but instead of answering, Sasha says to her: *“Is this the water God puts on you to make you safe?”* Sara has no idea what to say, in words that a six-year-old would understand- that the waters of baptism are not a charm against the hard places of life but a reminder of God’s presence there. But then she

remembers what Lynn said to her before her own baptism and she asks the child “Do you want it?” and Sasha says ***“Yes. I want that water.”*** And so she comes, by her own longing, to her baptism- and both Sara and Lynn, who share in it, are also transformed.

And in today’s reading from Acts, one of my favorite stories in all of scripture: an Ethiopian eunuch says to Philip, who has been riding with him and proclaiming to him the good news about Jesus, ***“Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?”*** And the chariot stops, and they go down into the water together, and Philip baptizes him. There is no more conversation between them- the Spirit of the Lord snatches Philip away to new places of witness- and the eunuch goes on his way rejoicing. Don’t you love the immediacy, the matter-of-fact nature of this statement- “Hey, here’s some water! Let’s have a baptism!” No checking the church calendar, planning the liturgy, inviting family and friends to come-

all of which are fun and even somewhat necessary, of course, but this is a story centered completely on longing, on hunger for a deeper abiding with God- as were Sara's and Sasha's stories. "Yes", said the eunuch (we don't know his name): *"Yes. I want that water."*

This eunuch- this particular person in this particular story- has been the subject of so much discussion that it would be easy to see him as a stereotype rather than a uniquely beloved child of God. We know that he is a court official in charge of the entire treasury of the queen of Ethiopia, which was a position of very high standing. He must have been wealthy, to have a chariot and servants to take him to Jerusalem to worship and then home again, and to purchase the Isaiah scroll he was reading- which also means that he was literate. And yet, from the perspective of the Greco-Roman culture that was the backdrop for the book of Acts, his status as a eunuch meant that certain things were denied to him- he would

not have been allowed in the temple to worship, or even participate in any way in the life of that worshipping community. *Something*- some deep longing- had still called him to make this pilgrimage and to be diligent in studying the scriptures of that very same community who had basically said “Because of your physical body, you are not good enough, **whole** enough to be one of us.”

A reading from Acts that we do not hear this lectionary year is another favorite of mine and serves as a kind of outline for the rest of the book: Acts 1:8, when Jesus says “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” According to the author it was immediately after this that Jesus ascended into heaven, and the apostles returned to Jerusalem to await the coming of the Spirit because then and only then could the expansion outwards, this proclaiming of the good news about Jesus spread

throughout the world. By the time we get to today's story from Acts, a lot has happened: the young Christian community has had tremendous success in evangelism but also much persecution- today's story immediately follows the stoning of Stephen for proclaiming Christ and the description of Saul (not yet Paul) as "ravaging" the church. The believers (except for the apostles) have fled from Jerusalem and Philip has been in Samaria, where huge crowds listened eagerly to what was said and were being baptized, until the Angel of the Lord directed him to that wilderness road where he would find the chariot with the eunuch reading Isaiah aloud as he travelled along. So you see- this is a fulfillment of that "ends of the earth" part of Jesus' call to discipleship: here is a dark-skinned stranger from a faraway place, faithful, yet unwelcome in the temple because he is a eunuch, with a powerful position yet powerless in that society- ***and it is his longing that brings him to the moment that shapes***

*all that is to come: “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from getting baptized?”*

Philip has already sat with the eunuch and answered his questions and told him the good news about Jesus, who broke bread with outcasts and sinners, who purposefully made himself unclean in order to show that all people- all bodies- are worthy of love- Jesus, who taught and lived and died for the belief that the good news and the rejoicing that it brings is for **all people, no exceptions**. Philip would also have known the cultural and religious “rules” about eunuchs but **says nothing**-at least nothing we have recorded- *he gets into the water with him and baptizes him*. The good news has been shared and received and touched this person’s soul so deeply that baptism and pure joy are the only possible response. And because of what they have shared together on this desert, wilderness road- a liminal space- the good

news is on its way to a place it has never been before. Barriers have been broken to make room for new ways of seeing, the ends of the earth are suddenly a lot closer than they were before and belonging means witness- as the eunuch went on his way rejoicing I absolutely believe that he told everyone he met exactly what his rejoicing was about.

On this Sunday where all of our readings have so much to offer us- our reading from 1 John teaching us that our longing to abide- which means to live fully within the love that can only be of God- can only be fulfilled if we love one another; and Jesus saying he is the vine and his father the vinegrower and we cannot bear fruit as we are called to do if we do not abide in this love- I love the story of the Ethiopian eunuch as our model. It is his longing and how he acts on this longing that brings him to abide in the fullness of the kingdom. It is his longing that



will help shape a community in a faraway place where the good news is joyfully shared and all people invited to claim this newness of life for their own. It is the longing of **each of us**- individual, fully beloved people that will take the church (and remember the church is the Body of Christ alive and at work in this world) to places it has never been before, building the kingdom in every moment where God's abiding love is made known. **Then- and only then- can we bear the fruit that will last. Amen.**