

Ethiopian Eunuchs
Easter V 2009 (Mother's Day)
St. Francis of Assisi
Written and preached by the Rev. Susan D. Parsons¹

It is the Fifth Sunday after Easter on the church calendar,

But it is Mother's Day on the secular calendar

Which most preachers would prefer to ignore because

Not everyone gets warm fuzzy feelings

When they hear the word Mother

For some us the word mother

Brings up uncomfortable or

Just downright bad feelings

Maybe mom wasn't so great or

Maybe she's passed away and we miss her

¹ The readings on which this sermon is based are found at the end of the sermon.
I ask your patience with regard to the layout of my sermons; they are laid out in a way that makes it easier for me to read aloud – not for the convenience of a reader - which may lead the silent reader to wonder if the writer had ever been apprised of the usefulness of punctuation.

But there are other reasons for feeling ambivalent too

What about all the women who

Want to have kids but can't have them or

The mothers who's children have died or been lost

So preaching on Mother's Day can be a little edgy

But not mentioning Mother's Day

Is just as problematic because

It is not just a dumb secular

Hallmark generated holiday

It is in fact a holiday that was created

With the best of intentions

By an nice Episcopalian Methodist woman

Who sincerely wanted to honor her beloved mother and

In general people want to hear a little something nice

about Mothers

So I have the pleasure of fitting some

Very dizzying John readings and an Ethiopian Eunuch

Into a Mother's Day sermon

We'll start with the Gospel reading from John

Jesus has just finished giving last minute instructions

To his disciples at the last supper

It's an important moment and

He's warning them that he's

Leaving them soon and

He wants them to

Take his message of love and forgiveness and acceptance

Out into the world

What we don't hear is that

They're not enthusiastic about this

They've got a lot of questions

A lot of doubts and

Who could blame them

They don't understand or get what's going on and

Jesus is talking about God pruning and

Burning the grapevine

The grapevine which is them

Which is us

This is a metaphor for

Going through difficult times

For suffering

They didn't want to hear that

Any more than we do

But Jesus also gives them hope

Tells them how he will **abide** in them

How he will be with them in spirit and

That their efforts will bear fruit

As long as they stay close to him

We hear John describe this abiding

He writes

'God is love and those who abide in love

Abide in God, and

God abides in them'

Jesus is trying to reassure the disciples and

Well it sounds good of course

John does make things sound good but

As I say the disciples probably haven't the vaguest idea

What Jesus is talking about

They couldn't have known how

Successful they will be at abiding in Jesus

How good they will be at

Loving and forgiving and healing and

Teaching and praying

The way a good mother does all those things for her children

It's one of their successes we hear about

In the story of the Ethiopian eunuch

As you heard an angel sends Philip to a road

Just outside Jerusalem

In Gaza the wilderness and

When Philip arrives the Holy Spirit tells him to

Run over to that chariot over there and

Talk to the fellow inside

Philip hurries over and as he approaches he hears

The Ethiopian reading Isaiah

Not surprising because in those days

People read out loud to themselves

Because it was easier to understand the writing

Which had no spaces or punctuation

The Ethiopian has a lot of questions for Phillip

Philip has answers and

Philip is so inspiring that

When they pass a pond

Which is most unusual in a desert wilderness

The Ethiopian suggests they wade in and

Philip can baptize him and

Philip does

Then just as they're stepping back out of the pond and

Before they have a chance to say goodbye or

Exchange business cards

Philip is snatched off by the Holy Spirit

Because she's got a little evangelizing

For him to do about 30 miles away and

The Ethiopian goes on his way rejoicing

Something really amazing happened in Gaza that day

This story isn't just another disciple success story

There's more to it than that

The Bible passage the Ethiopian was reading is

All about suffering

Unfair undeserved suffering

And the anguish of not being able to leave

Something of yourself on this earth

Something to carry on after you

Philip no doubt explained about Jesus'

Undeserved suffering and

How he had no children

But Jesus nevertheless left something behind

He left behind

A community a family that

Loves and accepts and forgives and nourishes

Unconditionally

In theory anyway

The Ethiopian a man from the ends of the earth

A man who couldn't have children

Someone the religious authorities would not

Have allowed in the Temple

Suddenly has a home and a family

And he becomes a mother

Because legend has it that

It is this man who

Takes Christianity back

To Ethiopia with him

Where it flourished and suffered and survived

In the face of all kinds of threat and hardship

Where Christianity continues to thrive
In the midst of mainly Muslim Africa
The legend may not be completely accurate
But it is true whether it actually
Happened or not

We are all of us mothers and

To be a good mother

To be a good disciple

To be a good evangelist

Doesn't require us to be of certain gender

Or to be one of those

Relentlessly cheerful individuals

Who seem to have no real experience of

What it means to suffer

All that we have to do is try to cooperate

With this mysterious thing

Called the Holy Spirit and

Pray for her to

Abide in us

Help us to love

Love God and ourselves and each other and the

Exotic weird strangers

From the ends of the earth

To help us to feel motherly towards them

And then when this

Wildly unpredictable thing we call our lives

Presents us with an opportunity

To be an evangelist or

To be a good mother

- in whatever sense of the word we are using it -

We have an excellent example

Of what a perfect mother might look like

Her name is Jesus

FIRST READING: Acts 8: 26 - 40

(NRSV) Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Ga'za." (This is a wilderness road.) 27 So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Canda'ce, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship 28 and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isai'ah. 29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." 30 So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isai'ah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31 He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 32 Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

33 In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth."

34 The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" 35 Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 36 As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" 37 38 He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. 40 But Philip found himself at Azo'tus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesare'a.

PSALM 22: 25 - 31

(NRSV) From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

26 The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD.

May your hearts live forever!

27 All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before him.
28 For dominion belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations.
29 To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,
and I shall live for him.
30 Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord,
31 and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that he has done it.

Note: Verse numbering in your psalter may differ from the above; verse numbering in Roman Catholic Bibles is one greater than the above.

22 *Deus, Deus meus* (ECUSA BCP)

- 24 My praise is of him in the great assembly; *
I will perform my vows in the presence of those who
worship him.
- 25 The poor shall eat and be satisfied,
and those who seek the LORD shall praise him: *
“May your heart live for ever!”
- 26 All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to
the LORD, *
and all the families of the nations bow before him.
- 27 For kingship belongs to the LORD; *
he rules over the nations.
- 28 To him alone all who sleep in the earth bow down
in worship; *
all who go down to the dust fall before him.
- 29 My soul shall live for him;
my descendants shall serve him; *
they shall be known as the LORD’S for ever.
- 30 They shall come and make known to a people yet unborn *
the saving deeds that he has done.

SECOND READING: 1 John 4: 7 - 21

(NRSV) Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. 13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15 God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16 So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18 There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19 We love because he first loved us. 20 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. 21 The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

GOSPEL: John 15: 1 - 8

John 15:1 (NRSV) "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5 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. 6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.