

The New Community: Love's Mandate

Acts 8: 26-40

1 John 4: 7-21

I'm continuing to consider the texts about the early communities of believers, following the lectionary. So much of what we have today is far removed from what the earliest communities of believers were dealing with.

We need to remember things like the Jewish influence, reckoning that even after the Jesus followers became known as Christians, and even after the Christians were largely detached from the synagogue, well into the second century, Christians observed both a Saturday Sabbath as well as Sunday as the Lord's Day. This indicates the amount of time it takes simply to transition out of Judaism – about 100 years after the crucifixion and resurrection.

We need to remember that accepted beliefs did not exist yet. The Nicene Creed was first adopted in the early fourth century, and the wording that we find so familiar in the Apostle's Creed isn't added until 60 years later, nearly the fifth century. How different were these editions of our familiar, even memorized creed? Here is the first version from the Nicene Creed from 325:

He suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven.

Here is the revised version of the same passage in the Nicene Creed from 381:

He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father.

Again, that was from the **Nicene** Creed. We really don't know when the **Apostle's** Creed was actually formulated; it was first mentioned in 390.

My point is that it took roughly three hundred years for the Christians to develop their first creedal statement about what their beliefs actually are. The doctrinal beliefs that many Christians today believe are so very important come much, much later. After the first Easter, or even the first Pentecost, the church didn't simply hatch into being.

My interest, which you're forced to indulge, is what did constitute the guiding beliefs and principles of the earliest communities. Knowing that they formed without creeds or doctrines, what core values guided them? Without having any scripture beyond the texts that we now call the Old Testament, having no New Testament, no gospels, we have to understand that Jesus existed in stories told and lessons taught. These principles are revealed in the way the earliest communities reflected on and did their ministry.

We return for another reading from 1st John. Let's recap some of what we've understood so far from 1st John. He wrestles with a problem about the understanding of

being baptized into new life in Jesus, being freed from sin, but with some libertines understanding this freedom to mean that since they can't sin, they can do whatever they like. He slams the door on that one. This has to do with identity, what it means to have new life in Christ. We see how the community of the faithful, the fellowship of the light, forms the effective witness of the body of Christ. The fellowship of the light is to stand in stark contrast to the darkness, opposite the way that is **not** of Christ, **not** of love, grace, justice, or peace.

Then 1st John spoke about people being children of God – *How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!* And then it says: *This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.* Again, we see identity being shaped with the recognition that all are sisters and brothers in the family of God's creation. All have value and are loved by God.

Last week, we heard about the shepherd's sacrifice, that it isn't enough to simply be kind, charitable, or thoughtful. This is what the text said: *This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.* What does this look like? *If anyone has worldly possessions and sees his brother [or sister] in need, but has no pity ... how can the love of God be in [them]?* In this, 1st John echoes the letter of James which says: *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.*

In today's passage from 1 John 4, the mandate of love hits its crescendo. It begins: *Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.* God's love, and Jesus's love for us is the reason we ought to love one another. 1st John has this memorable gem: *No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.* One could add, as I'm sure the ancient listeners did, that while none have seen God, none had seen Jesus either. Regardless, love is the mandate, the primary principle. And it concludes: *For those who do not love a brother or sister whom they **have** seen, cannot love God [or Jesus] whom they have **not** seen.*

1st John is a powerful piece of writing. From its teaching, we can identify values propelling the earliest Christian communities. These would include the new life in Jesus the Messiah, living in the **light** of God and apart from the **darkness** of the world; a celebration of the love of God in Jesus through whom we come to understand the sisterhood and brotherhood of all humanity within the family of God's loving creation and care; finally, the self-sacrifice of Jesus out of love and for the blessing of all as the model of believers' self-sacrifice for sisters and brothers in need. If we consider only these principles, we can see how the earliest Christians were very different from any of

the other forms of spirituality. We can also imagine that this group's basic practices and beliefs would be highly attractive to a broad spectrum of any society.

We get good insight to some of this belief and practice described in 1st John in the Acts 8 Philip story.

This account of Philip's ministry comes at a difficult time. In the preceding chapter, there was the stoning of Stephen and a general persecution of the followers of Jesus ensued. The disciples fled Jerusalem. What now?

Philip takes this time and turns it from a negative into a positive. In the first Philip story, he goes first to Samaria to share the good news of Jesus the Messiah. Initiating a ministry to *Samaritans* was a bold extension of their mission. Samaritans were considered lost, sinners outside the Jewish covenant, indeed despised by Jews. Samaritans weren't God's people, for the Jews at least. So, Philip's decision to go to Samaria crossed a major boundary. Philip seemed to understand this new situation in the terms we heard in 1st John. Old divisions and traditional exclusions common in Judaism had no place in the gospel of Jesus. There were sisters and brothers who could discover the blessing of new life in Jesus the Messiah, who could share love, serve others, and welcome all.

From the area north of Israel in Samaria, Philip is sent by an angel in our story to the south, to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch on a chariot. The way the story is told, it sounds like Philip is running alongside the chariot and having a conversation with the Ethiopian eunuch. We're also told that the eunuch is the chief treasury official in the palace of Queen Candace.

The text says that the Ethiopian eunuch had been in Jerusalem to worship. Although a worshiper at the Jerusalem temple, he is **not** identified as a Jew. Such people who are *not* Jews but *are* worshipers of the God of the Jews are named God-fearers. There is a special place for them in the outer periphery of the Temple area. They're prohibited from the main temple.

The eunuch is reading a text from the prophet Isaiah. Philip hears him reading and asks him if he understands what the prophet is talking about. The eunuch admits that he doesn't, and needs someone to act as a teacher and a guide. Philip gets invited into the chariot where he tells the eunuch how the passage relates to Jesus the Messiah.

At some point, the chariot comes to water, and the Ethiopian eunuch asks: *Why shouldn't I be baptized?* From our viewpoint in history, we would say, 'Why not?'

Well, there are two excellent reasons why this Ethiopian eunuch should **not** be baptized. **One** is that he's **Ethiopian**; **two** is that he's a **eunuch**. Ethiopians were considered outside the covenant of God's people; period, end of discussion. Like Greeks, Romans and Samaritans, Ethiopians were not chosen by God.

And eunuchs ... fuhgetaboutit! If there is one thing absolutely abhorrent to Jews, it is eunuchs. To have lost the ability to reproduce, to act as God intended a man should act, that was considered abominable. It's hard to imagine anything worse than being a eunuch.

Yet when Philip hears the man's request, his attitude is entirely different. His response is to baptize him on the spot. Philip's response is the same that Jesus would have had. Philip reflects that unconditional love, and shows the early Jesus movement faithfully regarding one seen as despicable and sinful instead as a brother to embrace.

What I'm finding is that the church actually seems to function better, more in line with what Jesus was teaching, without the tenets and creeds, the doctrines and the liturgies, and the fine-tuned theologies which turned Christianity into something Jesus wouldn't recognize as having much of anything to do with his ministry.

May we keep those first principles that we've identified as the core of our belief. That is: Jesus makes us sisters and brothers with all humanity; all are created by and belong to God, and all are loved by God; therefore those faithful to Jesus love the other whoever they are; finally, that love is given witness by the willingness of the faithful to sacrifice, even their well-being, for the sake of the other who is in need. If the church universal could get this right, we'd be in much better shape. Maybe then Jesus would recognize his followers.