

The Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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Have you ever had a time when you just didn't want to be in church. Maybe it was for a day, a season, or even several years? Maybe it wasn't your choice to leave; you might have been asked to stop coming because of a divorce, a disagreement with a pastor, a hurtful policy, an argument about doctrine—any of those things that cause friction in churches. To be a church person is to play a long game, and sometimes it just doesn't feel worth it.

I remember a season when church just didn't feel like a good fit for me. I didn't feel the call of a Sunday morning, and the whole experience caused more stress than it was worth. So I didn't go. I mean, I got there for Christmas and Easter, but that was about it.

During that time, I was spending a lot of time with friends. For awhile I lived with a dear friend who was studying at law school while I served as a hospice chaplain. Neither of us had a lot of money. We shared rent on a questionable apartment. He and I made dinners, had TV nights for friends while drinking terrible wine, and spent a lot of time on back patios talking about the world and our place in it. One afternoon, he shared with me that he was HIV positive and we talked for hours about all the fears and hopes that that kind of diagnosis brought up in him. He was with me while my dad underwent terrifying surgeries for his cancer. I don't think I had a better friend in those years, and I didn't meet him in the pews, and I'm pretty sure at the time he would have called himself a confirmed atheist. I didn't have a church family during those years, but I am convinced that I was still woven into the body of Christ even though it was outside of the church walls.

I believe religious people have a tendency to delineate spaces where God is present and places where God is not. It might be a box. It might be an altar. It might be an inner sanctum wherein God's voice might be heard. The ancient Israelites quite literally carried God to war in a box, an ark. Then later, they built God a Temple with thick, stone walls. We have a tendency to attempt a domestication of God. I'm not sure why that is—maybe a boxed God seems easier to control or manage somehow. Perhaps God unfettered is too terrifying to behold.

We're guilty of the same inclination, of course. We Episcopalians love our little churches, with their grey stone and red doors. Behind me, up above the high altar, it reads: "For God so Loved the World." It's a beautiful sentiment, and I know it has brought comfort to a hundreds of parishioners over the decades. Still, I wonder if it ever occurred to the artist that a message like that could live on the exterior of the building rather than the interior. What if that was painted on all four sides of the building, announcing to the entire world the love of God, rather than to the faithful already assembled. Our stained glass shines in on us and depicts the great stories of our faith. But again, I wonder, what if they shone outside? What if the stories of God's love and grace were not just for those of us in these walls but rather for the world. We almost can't help it. We like to put God in a box.

But God won't be contained. Philip, one of the lesser apostles—the guy who cleaned up the dishes after the others had finished eating—finds himself walking alongside the road and observes an Ethiopian eunuch reading and wrestling with the scriptures of the Old Testament. This eunuch is about as far from a good Jewish boy as a person could be. He was the wrong color. He practiced the wrong kind of sexual purity. He was the wrong lineage to be a member of the tribe of Abraham. And yet, God was unwilling to be contained by any of those abstractions. What is to prevent me from being baptised, the eunuch asks Phillip? And it turns out, the answer is nothing. Nothing is preventing you from being woven into the body of Christ.

God worked through the least of the apostles. God worked through the wrong kind of person, in the wrong kind of place. Despite our best efforts, God is unwilling to be contained in whatever new way we think to leash the divine.

Knowing this, how do we live? I believe that we approach any limits on the sovereignty of God with grave skepticism. I believe that our default assumption must be that God moves through the world in the places we might least expect. If our eyes are only fixed on the altar or on the tabernacle, we will miss the work that God is doing. God is out with striking teachers. God is with the homeless, the mentally ill, the destitute, those chronically disadvantaged in our society. These are the Ethiopian eunuchs today—the people who don't fit neatly into the walls the church has built. In Chicago, there are no Episcopal churches anywhere on the West side of the city—from the medical district all the way west to the posh suburbs. These are the poorest areas of the city. These are the areas with the highest concentration of brown and black people. And the church somehow thinks that God is simply not present there? The apostles teach a different gospel. God is everywhere in this world—particularly in places where it might be hard to see. God might be in the neighborhood that is discounted as “bad.” God might be in the atheist friend, comforting you on a porch over cheap wine. God might be in a strange man on the side of the road, asking to be baptised.

Listen, my friends. Listen to the experiences of the people outside of these walls. They will point us to where God is at work. They will share their struggles for justice and peace. And they will preach the Good News that God will not be contained—not by a box, not by a church, not by a tomb—no matter how hard we try. Amen.