

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
May 2, 2021

About four months into the pandemic, I decided that I needed to create some structure in my day, otherwise I was going to go a little bit insane, bouncing round my house, working from the sofa. So, I decided that every night at 7 pm, I'd put a meal on the table. No eating and watching television. No fast food. Just a simple meal, with candles and proper place settings each night. This was a way that made sense to me to create order out of the chaos. While I was cooking in the kitchen, I could usually hear Travis come downstairs after seeing clients in our home office. I would often say, over a pot of boiling water or simmering sauce, "Hey babe, could you set the table please?" He's usually glad to do it. But here is a secret: I think he does it wrong. I was always taught that knife and spoon go on the right, fork on the left, napkin either on the plate or under the fork, and water and wine glasses on the right above the cutlery. My husband was taught no such system. And so it was a little bit of a mystery how the settings would end up. But, as anyone who works for me knows, I mostly believe that the person doing the work gets to decide how the work is done, so I didn't say anything.

Until, once, I noticed that not only was the table set in a way that made no sense to me, my place was set differently than his place. I finally couldn't handle it any more, and I said, "What's with the place settings." Travis very matter of factly said that he is left handed, so he set it most convenient for him, and I am right handed, so he set my place most convenient for me. My mind was blown. This never once came up in Emily Post or Martha Stewart. It is taken as an article of faith that when you set a table you set each place the same. What, though, if people actually use cutlery differently based on how their bodies are made? I remember thinking that Travis' way of putting the table together was clever, welcoming, and something I'd never have thought of.

I regret to inform you that, usually, the church is the Martha Stewart in this story — often aping the habits of the early generation simply because it is what we know. We can have a hard time being innovative. We can have a hard time feeling the winds of change. We can have a particularly hard time seeing the changing needs of the people in our community and adjusting our practices to address them. We have really nice place settings, but are we always so good at actually feeding people?

This dilemma is as old as time. From the moment the first apostles were chosen on the day of Pentecost, the question has arisen in the church: "shall we follow the old ways, or shall we follow the new ways?" Or, said differently, "whose voices are we placing at the center of our conversations?"

Today's reading from Acts offers, in story form, a way of imagining what the church could look like. The apostle Philip is travelling and comes across a man reading the scriptures. This man was not born into a Jewish family. He serves a pagan queen as her chief advisor. He is a sexual minority. He is not from Israel but rather from Ethiopia, and his skin is much darker than anyone from the twelve tribes of Israel. So, what on earth is he doing reading sacred scripture from the Israelite prophets? Philip stops and they read the scroll together. The Ethiopian man offered an

interpretation, and Philip baptized him then and there. The Ethiopian's question, "look here is water, what is to prevent me from being baptized?" should stun the listener. For the early church, there should have been all kinds of impediments to his baptism — his country, his family, his color, his sexuality, his language, and his dietary habits. But it turned out that the words and actions of God couldn't be constrained by those things, and the Ethiopian was baptized then and there, and his story has lived on for two thousand years inspiring the faithful people of God.

This is the hard word for us to hear. We, the church, can get so bogged down in what we think we know and what we think we need. With a little puddle of water and a little piece of scripture, the Ethiopian lived out one of the most powerful stories in all of the new testament. And yet, here in 2021, in the church, we can lose sight of the basics. Sometimes we need someone from outside the usual suspects to preach to us about what is important. Where are the voices out in the world that we are not hearing? Who is out there, reading scripture today, and offering radical interpretations that we've never even thought about? Who will come to us and interrupt our table settings with something fresh and hopeful?

At St. Mark's, I think we try to do this when we read together and listen to the voices of the poor and people of color in this nation who are trying to give insight and prophetic correction to the majority white churches. I think we try to do this when we put the children front and center in our plans for the future. I think we try to do this when we make sure that female voices take places in leadership and in the pulpit and at the altar. But there is more to do. The Ethiopian held up a mirror to the early church, and the early church was made better for it. Who is holding up a mirror for us right now, asking us to re-examine some of the things we take for granted? In what ways has the pandemic, strangely enough, held up a mirror to us about what is important and what isn't? This is the work of a lifetime, and clearly, every generation has to grapple with honoring the goods of the past and listening to the prophets of the future.

And, really, this is the rub: what happens when the voices from the margin ask us to change something that we hold dear? This happened when women were ordained in 1971. It nearly broke the church in half. People said "we cannot change!" And yet we are still here. It happened when Virginia Theological Seminary offered 1.7 million in reparations to African American students descended from the slaves who built that same seminary. And it happened when the church nearly experienced a schism over the ordination of a gay bishop in 2003.

The voices from the margin are constantly asking the church to recognize that the power of God is cast wider than we think it is. The voices from the margin are constantly asking the church to examine those things that are nice versus those things that are essential. We will never get it right, this side of the kingdom of God, but there is honor in the striving.

And so, my beloved church, I invite you to think about the ways we set the table. Maybe some of them aren't necessary anymore. As we begin to rebuild this place — figuratively and literally — after we get through this terrible pandemic, let us lean on the power of God and the courage of Philip and the Ethiopian. We can be brave like them, and we can do great things like them. To God be the glory. Amen.