

Wet

Scripture text: Acts 8:26-39
The Rev. Matthew McCaffrey
Center Church on the Green, April 25, 2021



It's been quite a week, hasn't it?

Like almost everyone I know, I made sure I was near a radio last Tuesday afternoon at 5 o'clock, listening to a matter-of-fact state court judge reading some legal-sounding statements from a form. It doesn't sound like the sort of thing that makes for riveting listening or viewing, but in that moment it seemed like those dry statements, punctuated three times by the word "guilty," had brought our society together.

The former police officer who had chosen to kneel on George Floyd's neck for 9 long minutes had been convicted of murder for his actions. And the judge's announcement seemed to trigger a long exhalation from our entire country.

In that moment of exhaled breath and relief I heard hope. Hope mixed with wonder for Black persons who were prepared once again to be denied a sense of fair play and justice. Hope mixed with defiance for younger white people who had drawn a line and linked arms in demonstrations since Mr. Floyd's death. Hope mixed with

relief for neighbors across the country who sympathized with demonstrators but who were in the path of violent actions. Hope mixed with vindication for older people who had been speaking out for just and equal treatment for all society's members since hearing Dr. King in person in the 1960s.

Hope that lines could be finally be erased and voices could be heard and bodies could be embraced was all around us. And that hope still surrounds us this weekend even though the headlines and statements and memes have started to recede.

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We need more moments of hope like that. Because our recent pandemic separation has made it clear how strong is our human family's tendency to raise up barriers based on superficial differences.

Biologically, it is perhaps a survival trait. For hundreds of thousands of years our survival has depended on making binary choices: where's the good water hole? Is this plant good or bad to eat? Is that other human over there one of my tribe or not?

The survival trait of making binary comparisons remains elevated in most of us, a keen skill that informs everything we do. We're even good at discerning which among us are hesitant about making comparisons!

That low-level trait has moved upward along with our capacity for thought and reason. We have learned to choose friends and companions, workmates and playmates, based on qualities we call “chemistry” or “compatibility.” It still amounts to making the distinction between “us” and “them,” and if it is noticed and called out in us, we are genuinely surprised and maybe even horrified.

Distinctions and superficial differences even extend to the world of spiritual journey and belief. Church, you may say that all followers of Jesus everywhere are “one body in Christ.” It sounds good, right? But even among our closest kindred in that body, how many of you would choose to be a member of a church that has bishops? Or a church that has its own court system? Or a church that only allows the Lord’s Table to be served once every three months, and you must present your communion credentials in order to take part? I’m not talking about unrecognizable sects. I’m talking about our sister churches that stem from the Reformation.

And, I’m talking about superficial differences from which spring over 200 denominational organizations in the United States alone. ... We’re really, really good at finding and institutionalizing our differences.

All that comparing, all that choosing, all that distinguishing is thirsty work. We were drawn by the living waters that Jesus offers,

but in our drive to codify and organize our choices, we move further away from those waters. We're dry, when we want to be wet. We're thirsty, when we want to be satisfied.

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In our arid state, our thirsty longing, we hear this story of two men separated in almost every imaginable way by the choices made for them.

Philip. The Ethiopian eunuch. At first glance, they have exactly one thing in common: they are both Jewish. Philip is a Greek-speaker from the northern and western areas beyond Palestine. The eunuch is from the other side of the Red Sea, in the area of modern-day Sudan. Philip is a servant of widows. The eunuch is treasurer to the Candace (cahn·DAY·see), the reigning Queen Mother of his land. Philip is walking. The eunuch is riding.

But they are both Jewish, and they are both traveling the road from Jerusalem. And being Jewish, they have one other thing in common: the scrolls of the prophets. The scroll of Isaiah is the common language that binds them. The question Philip asks as the eunuch reads is the common invitation...it's perhaps the ritual dialogue that leads to common study. "Do you understand what you are reading?" "How can I understand without some help?"

That dialogue...sharing what they understand, puzzling over what is new...leads to that question. I think of it this way:

My life has been so dry. I have boggling responsibility and power in my duties, but I am not allowed to be a full member because of the hidden scar I bear. When you tell me of this Jesus, and the living water he offers—well, there’s water, and I’m dry. Why can’t I be baptized?”

It’s a question that opens torrents of life-giving water. It’s a question that washes away the superficial differences and dessicating choices. It’s a question that brings the wet into a dry life.

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Don’t you want to get wet, to get that kind of wet?

It has taken the availability of vaccines, and our entry into limited activities around other people, to bring into focus the dryness we have experienced. It’s not a one year drought. In many ways it is a drought as old as this congregation, a drought that sucked away all the life-giving water of our national experiment when we participated in kidnapping women and men and children from one continent and brought the survivors here to be purchased and sold for labor, as so much chattel.

It's a drought that one moment cannot quench, a drought whose dust will cling to us as long as we think we had no part in causing it or as long as we believe we do not benefit from it to this day.

The moment of unanimity this week is there to remind us of the truth we have lived our entire lives. The Chauvin trial was a verdict, but it does not immunize us from responsibility or quench our spiritual dryness.

We needed that moment of unanimity to remind us how dry we are, just as we need the question of the eunuch and the response of Philip to remind us how to quench that dryness and wash that dust off our souls.

The invitation, the imperative to swim alongside each other in the waters of humanity is in front of us. It is an invitation to get wet, and it is an imperative to let Christ's Spirit choose rather than our problematic survival instincts.

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Most of you watching and listening today are baptized in Christ. That baptism was an immersion in living waters, and it was a sign of our death to old ways and our rising with Christ to his way.

We can stay wet. We don't ever have to be spiritually dry again.
We are invited to swim in those living waters for our whole lives,
alongside the unlikely companions God's Spirit chooses.

Accept the Spirit's invitation to stay wet and be wild in those
waters. Alleluia! Amen.