Worship Resources for May 3rd, 2015—Fifth Sunday of Easter

Revised Common Lectionary: Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

Narrative Lectionary: Gospel as Salvation, Romans 1:1-17 (Matthew 9:10-13)

As we read about the first believers and the early church, we read this wonderful story about the Ethiopian Eunuch, and Philip’s encounter with him. This is someone who was an ethnic minority as well as a eunuch, but had come to Jerusalem to worship so he must have been interested in Judaism who was struggling to understand the scriptures, and was reading from Isaiah when Philip found him. He was in a position of power from Ethiopia, but was still an outsider. He could not be a convert as he was a eunuch, and eunuchs were prohibited by the Torah from being part of the assembly, but his interest in knowing this God has drawn him to Jerusalem, and when Philip helps him to understand the scriptures through the lens of Jesus, the eunuch declares “here is water. What is to prevent me from being baptized?” And Philip baptizes him. The eagerness and enthusiasm of this man to become part of the body of Christ is admirable, especially when he was outcast in so many other ways from the society around him outside of his homeland.

Psalm 22:25-31 speaks of the universality of God’s reign and that all nations shall come to worship God, and God is the ruler of all nations. God is the one for whom we live for, and the psalmist sings that even future generations, a people not yet born, will come to know God and God’s deliverance.

1 John 4:7-21 reminds us that in order to love God we must love our neighbor. We must love one another. If we do not do this, we do not love God. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them. This is the crux of the argument of 1 John: God is love, and we are imperfect, but we are made perfect by God’s love for us, and we testify that we have seen God’s love in Jesus Christ.

John 15:1-8 contains Jesus’ image of the Vine, and that we are the branches. We are called to bear fruit. If we are part of the vine, we must do our part and bear fruit, otherwise we are useless. God is the one that prunes the branches so they bear more fruit, removing sin from our lives when we seek forgiveness. The image of pruning seems painful, and it is painful to recognize where one has gone astray and needs to turn back to God, but it is necessary in order for us to grow.

The Narrative Lectionary turns to Paul’s letter to the Romans. In this first part, Paul is introducing himself to a church that does not know him, though he does know a few who are part of the congregation in Rome (see chapter 16). In Romans, Paul will share his theology and understanding of why both Jews and Greeks are now part of the body of Christ. Paul has wanted to go to Rome to meet the congregation but has not been able to get there yet, but he hopes by writing this letter that they will be encouraged that he will come, and that he hopes to share the Good News with them and encourage them in their ministry in Rome.

Matthew 9:10-13 is Jesus’ proclamation to the Pharisees who were troubled by Jesus eating with sinners and tax collectors. Jesus chose not to be with the religious, but rather with the ordinary, the broken, and the outcast.

We are reminded both in the Revised Common Lectionary in the story of the eunuch, as well as in the Narrative Lectionary in the passage from Matthew that Jesus came not to be with the religious people and tell them they were right, but to be with the oppressed, the marginalized and the outcast and say to them that they belong to God, that they are loved by God. Jesus is challenging the rest of us to recognize that if we think following Jesus is about being religious, we are wrong. Following Jesus is about reaching out in God’s love and loving one another, especially those that have been unloved by society. We keep missing the point, over and over again, but Christ reminds us, over and over again, that we are called to love.

Call to Worship

God is the Gardener, and God is planting something new;

 **In this time of worship, may we grow in Christ.**

God is pruning us back so we may bear fruit;

 **In this time of worship, may we repent, and know God’s forgiveness.**

God is nurturing us with water and Spirit, that we may blossom;

 **In this time of worship, may we praise our Creator and Sustainer!**

Come, let us join together in worship;

 **Let us praise God, who is growing something new in us.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of Love, we confess that at times we do not know You. We turn away our neighbors in need and we curse strangers instead of getting to know them. We do not see Your love in the world, and we do not love as You loved us. Forgive us for not loving others as You first loved us. Save us from our selfish ways. In the name of Christ, who gave himself up in the greatest act of love, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

God’s steadfast love endures forever. God is love, and when we love one another, we love God. God’s love is very near to us when we are caring for our neighbors in need. There are always opportunities to love our neighbor, and in doing so, we turn back to God’s ways. Go into the world knowing God’s love and forgiveness, and extend the same love and forgiveness to others. Amen.

Prayer

Almighty God, Architect of the Universe, may we find our place in Your design, may we build our lives in accordance to Your ways and will. May we connect with one another through Your love, and build up Your loving-kindness in this world. May we perceive Your design through the ancient scriptures and traditions passed down to us and grow in our understanding through our relationships with one another today. In this moment, may we know that we are part of something beyond our understanding, something incredibly You have designed, that surpasses this life and continues through eternity. In the name of Christ, who shows us Your design of love, forgiveness, and justice, we pray. Amen.