

Sunday, April 29, 2018 – Fifth Sunday of Easter/Confirmation/Full of Faith V
“God Creates Faith through the Word of Sacraments”

Acts 8: 26-40

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Story Applied

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

A man desperately wanted to know and worship God, but closeness with God was distant and

inaccessible. This man, an Ethiopian was an important official employed by his Queen, the closest American counterpart would be the Cabinet level position called Secretary of the Treasury, currently occupied by Steve Mnuchin – pull a \$1 bill out of your wallet and you’ll find the signature of the person who served in that position when your bill was ordered by the government. Well, that’s who this Ethiopian is. And he was in Jerusalem, and he’s reading the Hebrew Scriptures, right out of Isaiah 53, it seems that he believes in the God of Israel, and Jesus’ disciple Philip met up with him.

And though this man was important and he believed in God, closeness with God was impossible. The temple was set up with various access restrictions – most exclusive was the Holy of Holies, God’s throne room on earth where only the high priest could enter and then only on one day a year. Then you have the court of the priests, and then Hebrew men, and then Hebrew women, and way out on the fringes the Court of the Gentiles. The fence separating the Court of the Gentiles from the inner more holy areas was meant to keep out non-Jews and Jews who were ritually unclean and violation was punishable by death.

That this man was not Jewish by birth was something he could overcome. He could convert and enter the more holy areas to the extent the average Hebrew layman could. But this man was also a eunuch, and that made him ritually unclean in a way no amount of repentance could overcome, because he had no power to restore this physical loss. His case, you see, was hopeless – for all his responsibility, prestige, wealth and great intentions, access to God was impossible.

So he and Philip start talking about what he’s reading – verses that come up in our Good Friday Tenebrae service every year, as the lights go down because on this side of the cross, we know these words to be about Jesus’ suffering for us. Listen to this: “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.” What does this mean, who is this passage about, asks the Ethiopian man... and Philip goes on to tell this man the story of Jesus – a perfect sacrifice who suffered death for the whole world to restore access to God for all people.

Because the truth is, you and I are no different than that eunuch. Closeness with God is distant and inaccessible, impossible. Our uncleanness, our sin, makes us too flawed to enter God's holy presence... but to whatever extent the ancient Hebrews believed the eunuch was an absolutely hopeless cause, Jesus overcomes the Ethiopian official's flaws and loss, and our flaws and loss.

Look at what the words of Jesus' disciple Philip did – God used those words to bring this man, wealthy, prominent and yet utterly hopeless a gift that all the money in Queen Candace's treasury couldn't hope to purchase – the love and acceptance of God.

Four young people from our church are going to share their story with you now to encourage you to look to how God works through His Word, through His promises to you in baptism, through the gift of forgiveness in the Lord's Supper to bring us to believe in God. Here are their stories.

Confirmands share their Faith Statements

Resurrected living, a life full of faith doesn't start with you or with me – it starts with Jesus who was led like a sheep to slaughter for our sins to make us holy. That gift of God overcomes every sin, every error, every blemish, everything that makes you ugly or distant or a hopeless cause – and Jesus pours on hope.

The eunuch and Philip travel along and there's some water on the side of the road. It's desert... is it a stream? A spring? A stagnant, muddy puddle after a big rain? It doesn't say. The eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" 38 And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him." And you know what? That eunuch was more intimate with the promises of God in that moment than the most renowned of the High Priests who stepped into God's earthly throne room. The Holy Spirit Himself made the heart of that hopeless eunuch into God's Holy of Holies, His throne room on earth. And He does the same for you and me.

These young people shared stories of hope – of the love of God who gives them an "in." Today they share with us the story of their faith – a faith that started with God. Whether it was through hearing the Word like this Ethiopian official or through God's promise made long ago when they were babies in the water of baptism, today we celebrate a new life Full of Faith that comes from God. In Jesus' name, Amen.