

Yesterday at the annual diocesan Ministry and Mission Conference in Asheville, Bishop Rob Wright of the Diocese of Atlanta delivered the keynote address. His theme was “Discipleship in a Changing Time,” and I’d like to share with you several statements he made that I found both interesting and thought-worthy. Here we go:

“The status quo needs to be riled up!”

“We’re an inward-looking church struggling to follow an outward-looking Lord.”

“An Episcopalian invites someone to church every 26.3 years.” By the way, Bishop Wright says he the data to back-up that statement.

Another: “God is not an Episcopalian and doesn’t give a fig if the Episcopal Church lives. God wants a church that will do the work. Why not us?”

“Now that we’ve found love, what are we going to do with it?”

Of course, these comments are repeated to you out of the context in which they were given, but I suspect they evoked some sort of reaction in you. I’d love to have conversations about those reactions with you sometime after both of us have had more time to think about what Bishop Wright’s statements really mean to us as Christians, to our parish, and to the Episcopal Church as a whole. Keep them in mind as we explore today’s lessons.

Let’s begin with the Gospel of John, in which the word “abide” is used eight times. I guess that means it’s important. We know the word, of course, but it isn’t a word we use in everyday conversations or writings. The Greek root for “abide” is *menō*, a word that carries a range of meanings: “staying in place,” “enduring,” “holding out”— words that imply the steadfastness and reliability of God’s presence, and of God’s love and constant care for us. To help his listeners understand, Jesus uses the imagery of a vine to remind us of the effect of his love when it abides in us. “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” It’s a two way interaction, signifying that there’s a relationship involved, a commitment, a covenant to be made. And it’s apparent that God’s love for us doesn’t mean we can live our lives any way we want. “Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”

The use of the word “abide” continues in today’s passage from the First Letter of John, where it’s used six times. Many scholars consider the Letters of John to be a commentary on the Gospel of John. Here the unknown author takes the “abiding” relationship a step farther. “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.” He goes on to say that “whoever does not love does not know God,” and “Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.”

It couldn’t be any plainer, but it could be a lot easier. Sometimes it’s hard, even impossible to love others—when they have hurt or offended us, when their beliefs or actions are unlike our own and contradict our own beliefs and values. And not only is it hard to love them, it’s too often easy to hate them and to hang onto our hate for them. But God is love, and we cannot have God in our lives if we don’t also have love. Certainly we cannot be disciples of Christ without accepting God’s

love for us and loving God back. But it cannot end there. We must also love each other. Abiding in God's love is what makes it possible for us to do that, to remember that God is in each of us, helping us to treat each other as if we were Christ, as if we were interacting with Christ.

Today's story about Philip and the Ethiopian provides a good example of what I mean. Here is Philip, who hears the Lord through the voice of an angel, and heads out to a road in the middle of nowhere, apparently without question or hesitation. It's Philip's love for God and for our Lord Christ that allows him to hear the Lord's instruction, not once, but twice. When he gets to the road, he finds this Ethiopian eunuch seated in his chariot reading the prophet Isaiah aloud, as was the custom in those days. Prompted by God's Spirit, Philip begins talking with the man and then is invited to sit in the chariot with him. Before it's over, their "chance" meeting brings the Ethiopian into the loving arms of Jesus Christ through the waters of baptism.

This Ethiopian is a rich and powerful man, an official in the court of the queen, in charge of her entire treasury, one we would expect to have everything. Remember, though, that there were cultural prejudices in that day, just as in ours. Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, refers to this man throughout the text not as "the Ethiopian," but as "the eunuch," pointing out the differences from those who were part of Luke's own community. In Luke's world, an Ethiopian could have been anyone from the lands beyond Egypt who had dark skin, and certainly the reference to him as an Ethiopian also labels him as a Gentile. Because of these important factors in his identity, being both a Gentile and a eunuch, he would have been able to worship in the temple, but still would have been considered an outsider. Yet he's hungry to know the word of God, and once he hears it, his life is forever changed.

There's a lot for us to learn in this story. There's the deep, loving relationship Philip has with God that first opens his heart and mind to hear God's voice, and then to respond to it. That could have been risky for Philip, going out on that road alone, approaching a total stranger, helping the man understand God's word, and then baptizing him. Gosh, it sounds like a dangerous situation to me. What if Philip had been attacked by the Ethiopian or those who carried his chariot? What if the Ethiopian had rejected Philip's interpretation of God's words and his delivery of the Good News of our Lord Jesus Christ? What if Philip had told the man he couldn't be baptized because he and his circumstances were too unusual? What might we have done in Philip's situation? More to the point, how are we responding to opportunities to share the Good News in our own day?

Think about Bishop Wright's assertion that Episcopalians invite someone to church once every 26.3 years and there's the answer. If we're hesitant to invite people we know, as that statistic implies, how could we ever find the courage to ask someone like the Ethiopian eunuch, or a transgendered person, or an angry black man seeking justice, or a woman who doesn't speak our language, or anyone who—simply put—is just not like us? Is it because no one has ever taught us how to do that and we're afraid to take the risk, afraid of what might happen if we do? If we want to rile up the status quo, or become an outward-looking church that serves an outward-looking Lord, we're going to have to gather up our nerve and take some risks.

As you think about what that would mean for you and for our parish, remember that there's always Good News. And here it is: "There is no fear in love, and God's perfect love casts out fear." Now, what was Bishop Wright's question? Oh yes. Now that we've found love, what are we going to do with it?

God wants a church that will do the work. Why not us?

*Amen.*