



GRACE LUTHERAN CHURCH

EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN CANADA

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Fifth Sunday of Easter May 2, 2021 Now the Feast and Celebration

This Sunday's image of how the risen Christ shares his life with us is the image of the vine. Christ the vine and we the branches are alive in each other, in the mystery of mutual abiding described in the gospel and the first letter of John. Baptism makes us a part of Christ's living and life-giving self and makes us alive with Christ's life. As the vine brings food to the branches, Christ feeds us at his table. We are sent out to bear fruit for the life of the world.

A warm welcome to those who are here worshipping on-line with us today! Here at Grace Lutheran we believe God is active in your life. Even you being here now is testament of God's calling and leading in your heart, which you have faithfully heeded. So we welcome you, and pray that today you will be nurtured and that the gifts that God has graciously given you will be stirred for the sake of God's mission in the world.

GATHERING

THANKSGIVING FOR BAPTISM

Today in our gathering while apart, we are reminded by the words of the Ethiopian eunuch that there is nothing that keeps us from being baptized. There is nothing that stops God's welcome for us into God's kingdom. There is nothing that holds us back from God's grace and forgiveness. And for that, we give thanks.

Thanks for this ancient symbol of acceptance and belonging. Thanks for this representation of the love shown to us. Thanks for this physical manifestation of God with us.

And so those of you with water in front of you, you may dip your fingers in it. Feel God present with us in our midst. Hear God opening God's arms of welcome. See how we are all connected even when apart by the eternal body of Christ with all the saints.

When you are ready, you may use the water to mark your forehead with a sign of the cross. Remember that you are loved, you are worthy, and you are declared as God's children forever.
Thanks be to God. Amen.

GATHERING HYMN: Day by Day (#790)

GREETING

The connecting grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the valuable love of God, and the welcoming fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

And also with you.

KYRIE (p. 3)

NOW THE FEAST (p. 4)

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of wonders, you make all things new in water and Word as you feed us, your children, with love, joy, and peace. Lead us this day and always to the foot of the cross, where we can see you and your graciousness face to face. Teach us to love your Word, that we might digest it and it nourish us for life and community through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

WORD

FIRST READING: Acts 8:26-40

A reading from Acts.

Led by the Spirit, Philip encounters an Ethiopian official who is returning to his African home after having been to Jerusalem to worship. Philip uses their encounter to proclaim the gospel to him. Upon coming to faith in Jesus, he is baptized by Philip.

²⁶An angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸and was returning home; seated in

his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³²Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

³³In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth."

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

PSALM: Psalm 22:25-31

²⁵From you comes my praise in the great assembly;
I will perform my vows in the sight of those who fear the LORD.

²⁶**The poor shall eat and be satisfied,
Let those who seek the LORD give praise! May your hearts live forever!**

²⁷All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD;
all the families of nations shall bow before God.

²⁸**For dominion belongs to the LORD,
who rules over the nations.**

²⁹Indeed, all who sleep in the earth shall bow down in worship;
all who go down to the dust, though they be dead, shall kneel before the LORD.

³⁰**Their descendants shall serve the LORD,
whom they shall proclaim to generations to come.**

³¹They shall proclaim God's deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying to them, "The LORD has acted!"

SECOND READING: 1 John 4:7-21

A reading from 1 John.

We love God and others because God first loved us. We cannot say we love God, whom we have not seen, while hating fellow Christians, whom we regularly see. Love toward God is to be matched by love toward others because the essence of God is love.

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live

through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those 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. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION (p. 8)

GOSPEL: John 15:1-8

The holy gospel according to John.

Glory to you, O Lord.

On the night of his arrest, Jesus taught his disciples about the relationship they would have with him. Those who abide in his word and love bear fruit, for apart from him, they can do nothing.

[Jesus said:] ¹"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

SERMON

O God, may your Spirit lead us and guide us into relationship with you and each other, for the sake of the love you have for all the world through Jesus Christ. Amen.

So I've been having a pretty heavy couple of weeks. Yes, I technically didn't have to preach or lead a service last week, but it was still me preaching and I still had to put the service together. As you know I was at that Study Conference that I mentioned a couple sermons ago now, which

was about systemic racism and inclusion. And during the study conference we got news of the Derek Chauvin trials, and how almost immediately after a young black girl was fatally shot by the police. And as the week progressed there was even more news of racially charged violence. Then a few days later I attended another conference that was supposed to be about the words we use in liturgy, but it ended up being about the racial insensitivities found in some of our traditions and customs as a church.

So yeah, it's been a heavy couple of weeks. And truth be told, it is a bit heavier if you're the only Canadian born Asian male serving on the ELCIC roster. So heavy, in fact, that I almost didn't thoroughly enjoy the series finale of Falcon and the Winter Soldier last week on Disney+. Almost, but not quite. I did enjoy it. Thoroughly.

If you haven't heard about it, Falcon and the Winter Soldier is a TV series that follows the two characters from the movies, the Falcon Sam Wilson and the Winter Soldier James "Bucky" Barnes as they grapple with their identity past and present. Bucky had to deal with his guilt as a recently recovered brain washed assassin (yeah, I know), and Sam had to figure out how he can take up the mantle as the new Captain America.

You see, the symbol of Captain America is kind of a big deal... a big American deal... ...a big white American deal. And the previous and original Captain America was this tall, super muscular, blondish hair, and blueish eyed white man who stood for America's ideals while hopped up on this fictional super soldier serum, which made him so tall and muscular. He was retiring because he aged 50-60 some odd years in an alternate reality (yeah I know), and he decided to give his iconic star and striped shield to Sam, an ordinary, ex-military, non-super-soldier-serum'ed black man. Sam now had to deal with the idea of taking up this mantle. He has to figure out what will happen if the people saw their hero as something that didn't fit their expectation. He has to decide if the world is ready for a black Captain America. Sigh. Even in my comic fantasy world, I'm not free from themes of systemic racism and prejudice. Don't get me wrong, I still did thoroughly enjoy the series, it just continued to dig at this thing that has continued to bug me for a while now, so I just can't seem to let it go. And I probably shouldn't.

And then came the readings for this week. Interestingly enough, I was going to use this story out of Acts for my sermon at the Study Conference I told you about, but ultimately decided not to. I had no idea that it was coming up in the lectionary so soon. The Spirit really works, I guess. Anyway, I thought about using this story in that sermon almost two weeks ago because it shows us just how these racial tensions existed even in the ancient biblical world. And as it turns out, I can use this story in today's sermon because it shows us just how these racial tensions existed even in the ancient biblical world. We might be familiar with it, Philip who is a famous leader of the Christian church and clearly of Jewish descent, happens to encounter this unnamed eunuch of Ethiopian descent.

Now, don't ask me why the Ethiopian eunuch isn't named but only labelled by his ethnicity and position. Perhaps it's because his name is inconsequential to the point of retelling the story. Or maybe Philip never actually got his name, it was just one of those things where you meet somebody and chat with them to the point where it's just going to be weird to ask what their name is, like that window for introductions had passed a few anecdotes ago. Or, and I think this could be the most likely, the author of Acts didn't name him because they just wanted to point out how different this man is from Philip.

There is a stark contrast between an early Christian evangelist of Jewish descent and a royal eunuch of Ethiopian descent. Skin colour aside, there would be a difference in language, tradition, religious beliefs and practices, and of course social and economic class. These two were truly of different worlds. Of course, we're reading this story out of the bible, so Philip automatically would be seen as the protagonist, which somehow in our minds (and perhaps in the minds of this story's ancient readers) makes the Ethiopian the antagonist. We might not be comfortable in admitting that, but I do remember it explained to me that way in Sunday School when I was a kid. We'd call this a conversion experience, in how the good (i.e. Philip) went out and saved the bad (i.e. Ethiopian). That's how these conversion stories work, right? Some sort of internal conflict? Some kind of struggle between good and evil? Some way that the "light" eventually overpowers the "dark"?

So no wonder that we'd see this story like that if we have been conditioned to frame it that way. Good vs. evil. Light vs. dark. White vs. black.

Many of us might be taken aback a bit, thinking oh no we never looked at it that way. And I admit that I haven't either. But that is because most of us with lighter skin, who likely equate ourselves with good, can make this narrative fit very easily with our already presupposed paradigms. But for those of us with darker skin, well that dichotomy is heard in a completely different way.

And so I have to look at this passage with different eyes. I try to do away with all the prejudices that I've learned as I was growing up. I deliberately and intentionally look for and attempt to erase the temptation to read from a point of view of the privileged, and allow the story to speak without hindrance or assumptions.

You know what I saw in this story? I saw two equals who love the same God but perhaps express it in different ways getting together to discuss and learn about their faith. I saw two people who couldn't be more different spending time together for mutual learning and cross cultural relationship and respect building. I saw two diverse disciples sharing a God moment where both their eyes were opened to the Spirit working within them, revealing to them their connection to each other and to the true vine Jesus Christ our Lord.

And I can see this being us. Not that our congregation has any obvious conflict over our somewhat multiculturalism, but I can see society in general putting away all those things that divide us from them, and them from us. I can see our country that claims to be so welcoming and inclusive actually dismantling some of the systems that are put in place to specifically suppress and oppress those who don't fit that privileged point of view. I can see our world and everyone in it having their eyes and ears opened by the love of God and recognizing how we are in fact equal in our humanity and welcome to be part of the one body of Christ through sharing and mutual respect.

In the finale of Falcon and Winter Soldier (spoiler alert), Sam gives this speech about his identity as a black man taking the name of Captain America and carrying the shield. In front of a lot of people, reporters, and cameras, he says, "even now, here, I feel it. The stares, the judgement, and there's nothing I can do to change it. Yet I'm still here. No super serum, no blonde hair or blue eyes. The only power I have is that I believe we can do better."

And we can do better. Not just for the sake of a fictional character with mechanical bird wings and nearly indestructible shield, but for the sake of our humanity, our siblings in Christ, this community in which we are called to love, called to serve, and called to be children of God. I know it can be uncomfortable, especially if you're in a place of power right now, but this work is indicative of who we are as bearers of God's gospel. I know that it can be difficult and maybe even humiliating in admitting how we've gained from all this privilege, but it is important that we go through these steps toward true peace for all people in all places. I know that it seems insurmountable, but it is imperative that we learn to see each other through God's eyes, that regardless of difference in colour, culture, or creed, we can regard each other as lives that matter equally for the good of all.

As we continue through this season of Easter and new life, may we find it in us to start taking down the walls we have put up between us and those who aren't us, that we by God's grace might have the courage to invite others in and the boldness to venture out and love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

HYMN OF THE DAY: Christ, Be Our Light (#715)

CREED (p. 9)

With all of God's people in equal community, let us confess the Christian faith with the Apostle's Creed:

**I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.**

**I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.*
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.**

PRAYERS OF INTERCESSION

Led to be connected in community with the true vine and all its branches, let us pray for the church, the world, and all those in need. Each petition will end with, "ever-present God," and you may respond with **hear our prayer**. Ever-present God, **hear our prayer**.

O Lord, from you comes this assembly's praise and worship, for you have done great things in and around our lives. You join us with you and each other, and you empower us to proclaim your good news through our welcome and inclusion. May the world know of this inclusive love,

that we might all one day be able to put down our weapons and pick up our tools of peace and goodwill for all. Ever-present God, **hear our prayer.**

O Lord, we are satisfied with the grace that feeds us, and our hearts praise your name forever. May our gathering and worship be pleasing to you, that it reflect to the world this boundless grace. We pray especially for our neighbouring faith communities; our partner Anglican Church of Canada; our bishop Greg, assistant to the bishop Kathy, and national bishop Susan; and our companion churches of the BC Synod. In particular we pray for St. Peter's Estonian Lutheran Church in Vancouver, and their pastor (who is physically in Estonia currently) Algur Kaerma; Peace Lutheran Church in Vernon and their pastor David Hunter; and all our ELCIC rostered ministers who are serving Anglican congregations. Ever-present God, **hear our prayer.**

O Lord, you have created all life from here to the ends of the earth, and organized us into families and communities. May we remember how you have entrusted to us all that you have made, that we all might bow before you in our service and stewardship. Ever-present God, **hear our prayer.**

O Lord, dominion belongs to you and you rule over the nations with grace, mercy, and love. May all our world leaders and politicians be made aware of your grace and mercy, that they might be able to love their people and help guide us into peace. We pray especially for those that we have sponsored to enter our country: Solyana Amanuel; and Maekele Kiflu, Selam Haile, and their children. May their journey into our country be swift even in the midst of this pandemic. Ever-present God, **hear our prayer.**

O Lord, we kneel and bow before you in worship, for you lift us up out of our brokenness and death and bring us into life and wholeness. Be with all who are sick, who mourn, or who feel lonely, that your love might bring healing in mind, body, and spirit. Especially we pray for Diana; Beulah; Ron, Tess, and Mineko; Bev and family; Paula; Laura; Kandie; Thomas; Cindy; Linda; Charlotte; Chris; those who have contracted or been affected by COVID-19; and all whom we name aloud or quietly in our hearts at this time...
Ever-present God, **hear our prayer.**

O Lord, as did our ancestors, so shall we serve you and proclaim your name for the generations to come. You continually welcome us into your kingdom to be joined with you and all the saints, granting us life eternal in your love. Remind us always of this promise and inspire us to live in ways that are becoming of Easter people. Ever-present God, **hear our prayer.**

Into your hands, O God, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in the empowering word of the true vine, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

PEACE

The peace of Christ be with you always.

And also with you.

OFFERATORY HYMN: As the Grains of Wheat (p. 10)

OFFERING PRAYER

God of new life, we give you thanks for the food that you provide for us to share, that it be a reminder of your unending love and grace through Jesus our true vine, with whom we are connected and receive life. **Amen.**

MEAL

DIALOGUE

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

PREFACE

It is indeed right, our duty, and our joy, that we should at all times and places give thanks and praise to you, O God, through your Son Jesus Christ, who joins us together with him and all the saints that we might produce fruit in your name.

And so, with all the choirs of angels, the hosts of heaven, and the church on earth, we praise your name with this unending hymn:

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY (p. 11)

GREAT THANKSGIVING

O God in this assembly we praise you through our worship and our customs, for you satisfy us with your nourishing Word. All the ends of the earth shall remember your love and mercy, and above all the families and communities of faith shall bow before you. For in your dominion over the nations, you rule with grace and equity, and you rise us all up to be joined together as one body serving you and one voice proclaiming your goodness to the generations, for you have acted and sent to us your Son Jesus, to walk among us to teach by word and example of your love.

For on the night that he was betrayed, Jesus didn't smite his enemies or strike down his betrayers, but he called them his friends, and sat with them for a meal, where he in thanksgiving took some bread, broke and shared it and said them, "take and eat, this is my body broken for you. Do this for the remembrance of me."

And after they ate, he in the same way took the cup, and still with thanksgiving he shared it and said, "this cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin. Do this for the remembrance of me."

For it is in this food we have been given and need for life that we see our connectedness to the true vine, even as we declare this mystery of faith:

Christ has died.

Christ is risen.

Christ will come again.

Be present among us, O God, give us the strength and courage to be your people in this difficult time and fill us with the grace to treat others with the love that you have shown us, through Jesus Christ who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

LORD'S PRAYER (p. 13)

Joined together on the true vine of life, let us pray as Jesus taught us.

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.**

Give us today our daily bread.

**Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those
who sin against us.**

**Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.**

INVITATION TO COMMUNION

Taste and see God's goodness and grace.

Thanks be to God.

COMMUNION

COMMUNION HYMN: Lamb of God (p. 14)

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION

Holy God, you have again fed and nourished us with your Word and your love, strengthening us to serve you and all people for the sake of your kingdom and community in this world, through Jesus by the power of the Spirit.

Amen.

SENDING

BLESSING

The mercy of God our Creator hold you and enfold you,
the love of God the Christ lift you up and join you with all people,
the joy of God as Counsellor bring you blessing and peace, now and forever.

Amen.

SENDING SONG: On Eagle's Wings (#787)

DISMISSAL

Go in peace, abide in the true vine and proclaim God's love to all.

Thanks be to God.