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Text: Acts 8:26-40, John 15:1-8

Sacred Moments, Sacred Places

It was a warm day at the end of September in western Maine. There had been little relief from the heat all month, and the rain and cooler air was forecasted to roll in the next day. It was unofficially the last day of summer.

It so happened that the seasons were changing in my own life, too. I had graduated from seminary in May, spent the summer travelling and interviewing in churches, and I was nearly out of money. Luckily, I had an offer in hand, and it was time to make a decision.

Still grasping for assurance, I was not ready to accept the position. As I so often do when I need to clear my head, I laced up my sneakers and struck off on a run. I strode alongside the tall pines lining Keoka Lake for a few miles and then turned back. As I eyed the afternoon rays dancing on the lake from the sandy shoulder of route 35, relief washed over me. When I finished, I grabbed my phone and left messages for AJ and Geordie. I had made my decision: God was calling me to First Church in West Hartford. Then I stripped of my shirt and shoes and slowly waded into the lake. Typical of late September, the water was cool but not yet cold, so I dove in. As I splashed up to breathe, God's baptismal promise dripped from my beard and resonated in my soul: I felt beloved.

Our lives are sprinkled with sacred stories and sacred moments such as these. At the time, I knew something sacred was happening to me in the moment: my senses were abuzz, my heart opened wide, and I felt as if God were speaking directly to me. Looking back, I would not only call the afternoon sacred but also sacramental.

To draw upon Augustine's common definition, a sacrament is a visible and outward sign of an inward and invisible grace. It is a free gift of God's Spirit that we can touch and at the same touches our spirit. It is like cake we can have and eat, too. Our church officially recognizes two sacraments: Baptism and Holy Communion. In both we recognize that God draws us to Godself, and ultimately closer to one another through water and a shared meal.

True to our Reformation roots, we acknowledge that the Church is "where the word [of scripture] is rightly preached and the sacraments rightly administered." Interpret this narrowly and it limits our imaginations. We risk closing our eyes to sacramental moments all around us. Church becomes a drab building to hear tired messages and partake in lifeless rituals beside people who look and think like us. If we forget that the Church is a collection of beloved people whose eyes are opened to creation's sacredness, our doctrine of Church is lacking.

Imagine the Church through the lens of the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, and something much more vibrant emerges. The story begins with Holy Spirit calling the evangelist Philip to the chariot of a powerful eunuch. He then invites Philip up into his chariot to help him interpret the scroll of Isaiah.

Despite all his riches and influence, the eunuch feels like an outsider. In fact, some had likely used scripture to convince him that God's redeeming love did not extend to him. As he reads in

Isaiah of the servant who suffers for the liberation of all, he wonders if this radical love can really be for him. He asks Philip, ““About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?”

Philip then shares with him the good news that through Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection God’s embrace is broad enough for us all—assurances we proclaim at every baptism. Still incredulous, the eunuch says, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” The story doesn’t mention what was said next. We know that Philip did not wait until they came upon a stately church and sparkling clean water. The chariot simply pulls up to a desert pool of water, and Philip baptizes the eunuch.

In this brief sacramental encounter, the dry, dusty road becomes the Church. Of course, the unsung hero of this story—and my own—is the Holy Spirit, the person of God who draws us into deeper connection with our neighbors and transforms the common into the sacramental. Because the Holy Spirit is alive and in the world, so is the Church! If you are too committed to the Church as a single place, you are apt to miss out on the work of Holy Spirit all around you.

That being said, I want to tell you about another sacred place. On the Jesus was betrayed, he gathered with his disciples in the upper room, and they celebrated together a sacramental meal there. When the disciples were afraid after his death, they returned to that upper room. After his resurrection, Jesus joined them there, assuaged their fears, and breathed his Spirit upon them to go out and see the world overflowing with God’s Spirit.

For many of us, this Meetinghouse is like the upper room. Its prayer worn cushions have supported listeners of the preached word for decades. The shaggy red carpet has been the backdrop to more sacramental meals and moments than we can count. It is a repository of Spirit-filled memories, and more importantly the place where we continue to gather to find strength and companionship to do ministry in the world.

Also in the spirit of the Reformation, each generation has the responsibility of making its place of worship its own. To draw upon Jesus’ imagery of the grapevine, just as God cares for the vine, trimming the parts of us that no longer bear fruit, we are the caretakers of our sacred spaces. Sometimes an entire branch must be trimmed so new shoots can grow, and sometimes our Meetinghouse needs a new coat of paint so our space reflects our burgeoning vitality. Maintaining this place as our retreat, our special place to gather where preaching and the sacraments make more sense to us requires thoughtful planning. There will be plenty more discussion of this later during our Congregational Meeting after worship.

In the meantime, let us now turn to the sacramental meal set before us. The bread and the grape juice draw us to God’s grace and nourish us as the body of Christ. As she was in the desert pool on the road to Gaza, when Philip baptized the Ethiopian man, the Holy Spirit is with us now. As she was in the waters of your own baptism, the Holy Spirit is with us now. As she was in your own sacred moment that God’s love held you close, the Holy Spirit is with us now. Amen.

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