

The Rev. Bradley C. Dyche  
Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B  
St. Augustine's, Croton on Hudson  
Delivered May 13-14, 2006

In coming to this lectern, I realize that only two weeks ago today, dear Betsy Roadman delivered a sermon to say, "goodbye," only after David Carlson said, "Ciao," from this place last year. But, my friends, the time for bad, sad news is over. I have the opportunity to be a bearer of Good News, and I get to say, "Bonjour, Kumechiua, Bonjourno." A thousand times, and a thousand different ways, I get to say how excited I am to be here, and I have the chance to yell out, "Hello!" Hello!

If you have not heard, I am Bradley C. Dyche, Brad or Bradley C. to some (usually the latter is for those of a Southern persuasion), and Father Brad to yet others, and I have officially signed the dotted line to become your next Rector, effective July 1<sup>st</sup>. Yes, July. I am merely visiting amongst you today, with no real rectorial capacity yet. So, hold complaints at bay for a little while longer. Or better yet, air them at or to Gerald, who is still ably in charge as Senior Warden. Or even better, why not just those grievances them go. But I do still have lots to do before I get here. I have to deliver my own "arrivaderci" sermon at St. John's of Larchmont. I have to move. I am going to the Episcopal Church's General Convention in lovely downtown Columbus, Ohio. I am leading a group of 20 parishioners on a Mission Trip to Nicaragua where we will be building a home, and I am getting married to my partner of five years, Robert. But I am here today, as a sign of things yet to come and to say that I cannot wait for July, when I officially begin my ministry here. Robert and I are thrilled.

On this happy morning, the fifth Sunday of Easter, on the day when many of us celebrate our Mother's here and gone, Happy Mother's Day, and on a morning when we get to kick-off, celebrate, and usher in a new future together at St. A's, oddly enough, the readings appointed for today focus us on a man who has no future and not much hope. In our reading from Luke's Acts of the Apostles, we hear about a high pitched Ethiopian, a eunuch, who becomes the first gentile convert to the early Jesus movement. And perhaps because of my deep love of irony and paradox, or even my dark sense of humor, I would like for us to dwell with this childless man for awhile on this Sunday of hello's, for Mother's, and in Easter. Ironically and paradoxically, in this foreign man who could sire no children is a key for real joy and celebration, which is certainly relevant for me today, and I hope for you as well.

This eunuch of Acts is never named, but we are told several important points about his identity. One is that he worked for the Ethiopian Queen Candace. He was the money man, the keeper of the treasury of Ethiopia, which unlike present day, would have been sizeable. From that, we can deduce that this eunuch must have been an intelligent or at least well connected man. And we know that he was rewarded for his gifts. He had wealth, because he drove a chariot. But we also know that there was something missing for him. In the ancient world, before such wonders as adoption, a eunuch by definition had no future, no future generations, no one to pass his wealth onto, and no one to take care of him in his old age. As a result, although the eunuch was

materially satiated, he was spiritually impoverished, so much so that he we are told that he makes a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to worship, a difficult, arduous journey. Something was missing, more than a body part. So the eunuch goes to the great Temple in Jerusalem. But little does he know, that at the Temple in Jerusalem, the house of God, foreigners were not allowed beyond the court of the Gentiles, and Eunuchs were not allowed into the Temple, period. On two counts, this man's search to fill the void in his life by seeking God had been thwarted.

And so we find the eunuch on a remote desert road. Amazingly enough, he has not abandoned God. Instead, he goes to the Bible for solace, try, trying again for a new view of life. He reads from the prophet Isaiah, "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter... In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." And the Eunuch is puzzled, cannot understand the meaning of this passage. And I want to claim that what he cannot possibly comprehend is how God could be identified with suffering. For in his mind, at that time, suffering would have been thought to be punishment, while only health, wealth, and children would be thought to be a blessing of God. This man, being ostracized from the Temple, being without progeny would have seen himself as cursed and punished, despite his monetary success. The eunuch is being held hostage to a hostile theology and the mirage of divine favor through success. Enter the Apostle Philip. Phillip tells the Eunuch about Jesus, the crucified one, the one who teaches us a new way to be with one another, a way without exclusion, a way without violence to self, body parts, or others. Phillip tells the eunuch about a God not apart from suffering but one who is in and with those who do suffer. Philip shows the eunuch that through the life and death of Jesus, we have been shown that our ways of excluding others can result even in the killing of God, and that there is a new way to be together, a resurrecting, loving, more peaceful way to live, and this is the new family of God. And the eunuch finds hope, in spite of the Temple and in spite of his unique eunuchnicity. Although he cannot have a child, he gives birth, is made anew, and he realizes that he too has a future. Perhaps...., as he was unfurling the scroll of Isaiah, he should have also read the 56<sup>th</sup> Chapter wherein the prophet writes that God promises to "Gather the outcasts of Israel," (Isaiah 56:8), including the "eunuchs and foreigners," (Isaiah 56:3-4). And from that, we know that the love of God is about gathering us up rather than excluding us or us excluding one another.

The conversion of the eunuch symbolized a significant shift for the early Christians. Gentiles were suddenly included, involved in, and integral to this new family of God. Traditional boundaries that were unhelpful were widened. And this is what excites me about talking about the eunuch today. The eunuch found a new family, a new hope, and we have a new family and new hope as we start a new life together. And we get the opportunity to work toward a family that cares for all, that is responsible in its dealings, is nonviolent in how we deal with one another in our words and actions. And we have the opportunity to model the love of God both here and in the world around us.

Of course, as I begin on this Sunday of fresh family starts, there are so many other things that I want to say. I feel that I need to say that this is not Iraq. I'm not coming here with my own preconceived ideas of what needs to be done. I instead want to live amongst you, see how things are done, and then prayerfully tweak that, help us and our parish grow and prosper. I also want to

commend to each of us to be rooted in but not wedded to the past and how things “used to be.” I want to ask each of us, including me, to make room for new growth and be ready for some pruning. I want to say that I hope we can be generous with one another, laugh with one another. Let us be forgiving of each other’s weaknesses and value one another’s strengths. I ask us to love one another, and care for one another, even when we annoy one another, even when we do not agree, even in the coming months as I try to learn your names and get to know you, and I forget your names. And like the Apostle Phillip, I hope that we will be cognizant not only of the people within these walls but also of those outside them and their needs.

I want to say all of these things and more. But ultimately, I want to say, that we should enjoy this moment, this time, this honeymoon together. We should be thankful for the past leadership, for the search committee, for the vestry, especially Gerald, his sense of humor, and all the wardens of the past year. And we should behold this moment in the life of this institution. I am sure that there are difficult decisions and times ahead. But let us relish this moment of joy and newfound family. And let our time together be fertile and fecund and fraught with possibility. Let us enjoy it, because like a newly baptized eunuch, our future is bright. Let us enjoy it, fellow family members, together.