

ANGELS UNAWARES

Sermon for Easter 5B: Acts 8:26-40, 1Jn 4:7-21

LPC, 5/10/09

Years ago, during one of the most difficult periods of my life, the person who more than anyone represented the love of God to me was my Avon lady, who happened to be a Mormon. She had been through the same thing I was going through and she spoke from experience. Specifically, she spoke from the experience of knowing God's presence in her difficulty, or at least being able to recognize God's presence in retrospect. I do not remember the words she used except that she referred to God, as many Mormons do, as "our heavenly Father." Maybe that by itself was enough to help me.

In an unrelated incident, I once ran into a woman I had counseled a year previous about a destructive relationship she was in. In the intervening year, she had terminated the bad relationship and was on her way to healing. She credited my words as being the turning point for her. Specifically, she remembered my telling her, "You are a child of God." I barely remembered saying this, but God had used my words to change this woman's life.

I recount both these stories because they show both the receiving and the giving end of God's saving love. Further, I recount these stories to demonstrate my own personal experience of God using human beings as vessels of God's love, or as messengers. In case you don't know it, the biblical word for messengers is "angels." God uses human beings as God's angels to minister to God's people.

We have such a story in today's story from the book of Acts. In this story, which takes place after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, Jesus' follower Philip is sent by an angel of his own to the Gaza road. Here he encounters a high official from the Ethiopian court. Though powerful in his own country, the Ethiopian is an outcast by Jewish standards, being both a gentile (a non-Jew) and a eunuch.

Just an aside about this, lest it become a distraction: We are not told how or why this man became a eunuch. Perhaps the gelding of human beings was widely practiced in Ethiopia under certain circumstances. Suffice to say it was not practiced by the Jews. What is relevant to the context of our story is that Jewish practice specifically excluded eunuchs from the full ritual worship of God.

Nevertheless, despite his exclusion by Hebrew standards, it is the Hebrew scriptures this man happens to be reading when Philip encounters him. People used to read aloud to themselves, so Philip hears and recognizes the holy text and asks the Ethiopian if he understands it. The Ethiopian asks for Philip's guidance. Philip then expounds on the scriptures, interpreting them in the light of Jesus Christ. The man listens intently. He is so impressed that finally he asks to be baptized in a convenient body of water. Philip complies. Then Philip is literally spirited away, while the eunuch rejoices in his new life in Christ.

The passage makes clear that God is using Philip to convey the Good News of Christ's saving love to the Ethiopian. You might say that the entire book of Acts centers around the theme of God using human beings as God's messengers of the Gospel.

The Bible, especially the Old Testament, abounds with stories of God directly revealing Godself to the prophets, and to others of God's chosen, without intermediaries. In the first part of the New Testament, God reveals Godself in the person of Jesus Christ. With the exception of the book of Revelation, the rest of the New Testament is about ordinary human beings conveying the Gospel of God's love. The book of Acts serves a sort of transition between God's self-revelation in Jesus, and God's self-revelation in ordinary human beings.

God uses humans as God's angels. God uses humans as vessels and communicators of God's love. This message has meaning for us as both receivers and givers.

Never doubt, especially in times of great need, that God may be communicating to you through the voices, touch and presence of other people. When you are praying for something specific (say for direction or confidence or healing,) be alert to how other people are dealing with you. Don't only look for "likely" people, such as your priest or Episcopalian friends. My Mormon friend was God's angel to me, remember. Sometimes even less likely people may be angels of God's love. They may be completely unaware that they are speaking for God. Angels unawares.

Also, never doubt that you might be an angel to another, communicating God's love through your voice, your touch, your presence.

At this point it must be said that not everyone should be regarded as God potential angel. We will not always be acting as God's angel to others. There are mean, even satanic people out there, and we in turn are capable of meanness to others. But there are ways to recognize God communicating through others. There are ways to model your own behavior to try to make it a communication from God to another.

The first letter of John tells how. God communicates love. If love is coming through the behavior of others, trust them as messengers of God. If love comes through our behavior, we can be God's angels too. John's letter says, "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." In other words, we can't see God, but we can see each other. When we see love, we see God.

Be alert to God's love. When you see it, you're seeing an angel. When you love, you are an angel.