



## THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN EASTER

14 May 2006

Acts 8:26-40

Psalm 22

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

Drawing lines in the sand. It's one of the things we humans do best. I, me, and mine on one side, the "other," the unacceptable, the outcast on the opposite side. And the justifications for drawing our lines and for placing other people on the other side of the lines we draw in the sand—well, they're infinite—limited only by that remarkable, double-edged sword called human imagination. Perhaps we don't like the way "they" look. Too tall, too thin, too fat, too short. Hair or eyes different from ours. Skin not quite the same color as ours. Perhaps their language and culture are different from ours. Then, to make good and sure that our placement of the others on the opposite side of the line remains secure, we heap as many negative nouns and adjectives upon them as possible. You know: lazy, drunk, greedy, slow, promiscuous, unstable, sneaky, stupid, pervert, prostitute, thief, alien, welfare queen, Jew, Mick, Spic, and Wop; wow, this is fun—we could keep at it all day and hardly begin to exhaust the labels we pile upon those on the opposite side of the lines we draw in the sand.

Consider the label "eunuch," a word we hear in this morning's first reading. In the cultural world of the scriptures, a eunuch is a male who has been castrated, or who is asexual, or who is an intersexed individual, or a person with ambiguous genitalia. "Eunuch," a word to be uttered with a look of disgust if not downright horror. "Eunuch," a word that was quite helpfully extended to also mean, any male past adolescence who was not married . . . sort of like, well, Jesus. "Eunuch," a word so very useful in justifying those lines we draw in the sand.

And then, as if all the labels weren't enough, we, in a true fit of creativity, make for ourselves god-in-our-own-image, a particular god who will faithfully, unfailingly side with us who are on the proper, acceptable, righteous side of the line, a god who will dependably join with us in condemnation of the dreaded other, the one on the other side of the lines we draw in the sand. Let's revisit "eunuchs." The scriptures are quite clear. In Deuteronomy we hear no eunuch will be allowed to be a part of the assembly. No exceptions. Eunuchs join all sorts of others on the opposite side of the line: women, foreigners, lepers, cripples, the blind, pig farmers, fishers to name a few. Eunuchs, consigned to the ranks of those supposedly beyond the love of "god." We love the god who joins with us in sending those on the other side of the line straight to hell and for all eternity – preferably sooner rather than later. Gosh, electric chairs, nooses, gas chambers, armies, and bombs—even big rocks—so wonderfully useful after all. Oh, and crosses, by all means, let us not forget crosses.

And then along come Jesus and his followers, the people of the way as they call themselves. And wherever the line in the sand is drawn—wherever and for whatever reason—there is Jesus—on the wrong side of the line, on the side of the line where stand the dreaded "other." And with Jesus, the people of the way, the Jesus way, the Christ way, the way that surely leads to the cross. And Jesus and the people of the way of the cross have the unmitigated gall to say that *this* is the way of *true* life, the life that is of the ages. What's more, what's worse, is that Jesus and the people of the way have the gall, the unmitigated gall to look even at the scriptures and say—look, here, there, wherever lines in the sand get drawn—fingerprints, bloody human fingerprints in constant battle with the people of the way who by the guidance of the Holy Spirit existed

even before Jesus, women and men who proclaimed the true God who is ever, only, and always to be found on the opposite, other side, the wrong side of the lines we draw in the sand.

Christ Jesus and the people of the way of the cross, they step over the lines we draw in the sand—and just look what ends up happening: eunuchs receive the promises of the loving God who created them, and they are proclaimed whole and clean and truly wonderful in God's sight. And all the others on the wrong side of the line—all of them touched, embraced, loved, proclaimed to be God's very own daughters and sons—every single one of them. And all of them—joined to Jesus, people now who live with Jesus, in Jesus on the wrong side of the line—people now who are continually becoming *one* with Jesus: one with Jesus in loving, loving to death, their own death, all who are “other,” all who dwell on the wrong side of the line. This, beloved sisters and brothers is who you are—people of the way, one with the Jesus who is forever to be found on the wrong side of the line. This is who you truly are—branches grafted onto a sturdy vine, one with the vine—living, working, giving—and sometimes even dying—for the sake of any and all on the suspect side of the lines drawn in the sand.

Wild things that we can sometimes be, however, we oft' times become like an unruly offshoot of the true vine – we send out little creepers that seem to think things are better on the side of the line where privilege and power dwell, on that side of the line where dwell the empty promises of the gods made by human hands, the gods that speak the cruel words of exclusion, entitlement, condemnation, hate, prejudice, and fear – the gods that promise that the life is to be found in money, possessions, muscles, body-type, military superiority, skin color, language, gender, age, marital status, and in -isms nearly without number. And so our wild tendrils, our rebellious creepers—the Spirit, a most Holy Gardener, comes to trim and prune. Among the pruning tools of the Holy Spirit Gardener—the Word proclaimed—the Word that tell us over and over who we truly are—in words like those of St. John that tell us again that we are branches on the vine of the unseen God of love, and in the vine, one with the God who is love, one with the God who is *in* love with us and with all people, and therefore, we do not hate—it's not who we are. And the Holy Spirit Gardener waters us, and with that life-giving water proclaims the Gospel promise—that God is continually making *you* branches of the true vine, and because God is bigger than you, not even your wild, creeping tendrils are going to mess that up. And the Holy Spirit Gardener feeds us—with wine and bread that become for us, that become for you, the true essence of the true vine that you may be people of the way.

Hear it once more people of God: with Christ, your life is life lived in solidarity with all the beloved of God who dwell on the wrong side of the lines drawn in the sand. Now come, take Christ into your own bodies that you may strengthened to be who you are. And as you go out into the world this day, mark yourselves again with water and the sign of the cross—for you *are* people of the way of the cross, taking your place in love with all who dwell on the wrong side of the lines drawn in the sand.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son +, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.