

“Fruit from the Barren Tree”
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
April 29, 2018

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

In 1939, the African American jazz singer Billie Holliday performed at a tiny basement club in Greenwich Village, The Cafe Society. This little-known club allowed for racial mixing, which even in New York City was rare at that time. She ended her performance with a song that she had written about lynchings in the South, called “Strange Fruit.”

“Southern trees bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees”

In case you do not know this ugly part of American history, lynching was a form of mob justice in America between 1877 and 1950, that saw the deaths of 4,400 black men and women and even children. It was the hanging, dragging, and/or burning of black bodies by whites; though it was in the name of justice over a perceived offence against white people, the black people who were lynched never saw the inside of a courtroom, and the accusations against victims were often trite, such as for Park Banks, who was lynched for carrying a photograph of a white woman in his pocket. In case you think of lynchings in America as something from an earlier generation, let me tell you that when I began college at Presbyterian College in South Carolina, a fraternity on my campus was banned because at a party they called “Old South,” in which the men dressed in Confederate uniforms and their dates dressed in Southern Belle gowns, one fraternity

brother had thought to hang a stuffed dummy of a black man from the oak tree outside the fraternity house. I transferred out of that college as quickly as I could, but I must not ignore the fact that there are still people today who find this terrible history funny.

Last week a memorial opened in Montgomery, Alabama, honoring victims of lynchings. It has 800 rusty steel boxes that are suspended by poles from the ceiling. Each box bears the name of a lynching victim. They sway a little with the wind, like silent bells, and the image evokes bodies, or coffins. Another display at the memorial is a collection of glass jars, each labeled with a name, each containing dirt collected by the family of the victim from wherever he or she was killed. When I lived in Atlanta, I visited a temporary memorial to victims of lynchings, in 2003. At the time I was a chaplain at a private school, and I had brought my homeroom class of 9th graders to see the exhibit. The school I was serving had formed by the Episcopal Church and grew tremendously during the time of integration, because wealthy white families did not want their children attending mixed schools. When The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s son was denied admission, the Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta made a statement that churches and schools should move towards integration. The school then decided that it no longer needed to be part of the Episcopal Church. So that was the school where I chaplained, and though it made important efforts to reckon with the racism of its past, I felt the strong need for the 9th graders I was teaching to grapple with their history and their privilege. As it happened, during our visit to the lynching exhibit, we ran into a group of college students from Morehouse and Spelman Colleges, two of Atlanta's historically black universities. Those students asked if they could sit down with my students and share with one another their reactions and experiences of the exhibit. My hope is, that day was a conversion experience for my students, most of whom were white, and most of whom had come from immense privilege. I did not want their guilt, because I think guilt can be self-indulgent and paralyzing. What I wanted was a conversion from complacency. I wanted them to know that their privilege often comes

at the expense of someone else's oppression. My hope was and is that they would use their awareness and the power they would grow into to offer something back to help tip the scales back towards the balance of justice.

Yesterday, James Cone, professor of theology at Union Theological Seminary, and also known as the father of Black Liberation Theology, died. I was immensely influenced by his work, as well as the other forms of liberation theology that he influenced. In his book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, James Cone called the crucifixion "a first-century, Roman lynching." He drew parallels between Jesus' persecution and the persecution of poor, black people in the US. His identification of Jesus with those who are oppressed gives holy meaning to the struggle for liberation. It is a way of calling forth resistance and life from the devastation of violence and domination.

I wonder if some part of this story resounded with the Ethiopian eunuch in the Acts passage. He was described as working for the Candace, who was the queen of Ethiopia. Her name was not Candace; Candace was her title, much like Caesar was the title of the Roman Emperor. We do not know how he became a eunuch, whether by birth, by choice, or by coercion, but we can imagine that taking away his sexual freedom made him be seen as more appropriate to serve the Candace. In his castrated state, his body no longer completely belonged to him.

We also know that the man, who had just been to Jerusalem to worship, would have not been allowed entry into the Temple, because the Torah listed men with crushed testicles as unfit for entering the Temple.

This person, to whom the Bible gave no name but instead described him by his race and the status of his sexual organs, may have been the first African convert to Christianity. I find it very telling that Philip encounters the Ethiopian pondering the scroll from Isaiah, more specifically these verses: "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.” The same verses could be used to describe a lynching in America, but Philip uses these words from Isaiah, which was written centuries before Jesus’ birth, as a starting point for sharing the good news with the Ethiopian about Jesus Christ.

There is something about the story of Jesus that wrapped itself around the imagination and heart of the Ethiopian, much like a vine shoots out tiny tendrils that take hold of the branch by winding around the branch repeatedly. Though the tendril is small and weak, it offers strength in its repeated wrappings.

As Philip and the Ethiopian walked, there suddenly appeared a body of water. The Ethiopian called out with enthusiasm, “Look! Here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” And so they stopped the chariot, and he and Philip went down to the water, where Philip baptized the Ethiopian.

Now we look at that story as as one of conversion of the Ethiopian. But I believe it is also a story of conversion for Philip, and for the church of Jesus Christ. In the encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch, the Holy Spirit brings Philip and the church into a series of border crossings. Philip moves from the city to the wilderness to meet the Ethiopian. He moves from the north, where Jerusalem is located, to the south, where Gaza is. He moves from the pure male body that Philip possesses, to the deviant body of the eunuch, who would have been considered ritually impure for worship in the Jewish Temple. In redefining boundaries and borders, the Holy Spirit shows Philip and the church how to move from exclusivity to *inclusivity* and in doing so, allowing all to “cross freely into God’s salvation.”¹

¹ Manuel Villalobos, “Bodies *Del Otro Lado* Finding Life and Hope in the Borderland: Gloria Anzaldua, The Ethiopian Eunuch of Acts 8:26-40, Y Yo” in *Bible Trouble: Queer Reading at the Boundaries of Biblical Scholarship* ed. Teresa Honrsby and Ken Stone 2011: Society of Biblical Literature, p. 199

Consider the power that this Ethiopian, who because of his physical condition would have been considered as a barren tree, actually helped to bring the church to a more fruitful knowledge of the generosity of God's love and salvation!

I am convinced that the Holy Spirit has continued to guide her church and people past divisions, gently and sometimes swiftly moving us beyond our borders and boundaries, so that we can better come together as the Body of Christ. Last week we saw a powerful witness of this work as leaders from the divided nation of Korea met and came up with an unprecedented plan for unity and peace. Some of the goals that were discussed were:

- 1) Allow for the reunion of families that were separated by the Korean War
- 2) Begin work for the co-prosperity of the nation.
- 3) Demilitarization, including the denuclearization of the entire peninsula
- 4) Though some are still skeptical, the intention is for the Korean Peninsula to move toward declaring an official end to the Korean War.

Like the United States that has lived the ugly truth of our history of slavery, lynchings, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration, Koreans still have a long and difficult road ahead to work for the peace, unity, and prosperity as its borders dividing them become less important. Some would consider this barren land, where no fruit can grow. But may we instead have the faith of the Ethiopian, that by God's Holy Spirit, amazing fruits can grow in places that were considered barren. This is good news for our countries, it is good news for our lives, and it is the good news of our faith. Amen.