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Jessica: Welcome to Lectionary Kickstart, where we're sparking your thoughts for Sunday as you plan your sermon or teaching lesson.

I'm your host and producer, Jessica Bordeleau, talking with Dr. David Schmitt and Dr. Peter Nafzger.

They're both professors of homiletics here at Concordia Seminary St. Louis.

You can hear all about us in our introductory episode, but trust me, they are pretty good preachers.

Alright guys, let's get started.

David, where are we in the church here?

David: It is the fifth Sunday of Easter, the time when the church remembers the resurrection of Christ and its implications for our life.

Jessica: And Peter, what are the texts for this week?

Peter:

The readings are from Acts chapter 8, 1 John chapter 4, John 15, and the psalm is the last one. Well, Psalm 150.

Jessica: As always, I ask each of you to tell me which text you would choose to preach about.

David, you got to the recording studio earlier, so you win.

You get to start.

David: Because I was bringing you cookies.

Jessica: That's right. I have sugar cookies this morning.

David: Sugar cookies, yeah.

So, I would go with the reading from Acts 8.

Peter: That's a great text.

David: Why do you think so?

Peter: I just, I love how the Lord is behind the scenes bringing together someone who's confused about the scriptures

and someone who's informed about the scriptures and puts them together to spread the good news

that leads to the faith and the baptism and the life of a new Christian.

David: That is beautiful.

I agree with you.

I agree.

So, that's what I was going to say.

So, thank you.

Well, there you go.

There we go.

No, really.

It's just, it is such an amazing reading.

And partly what I think is so amazing about it is that the reading has all of these weird things that are happening in it.

And that in the center is something that's really, really common.

So, you've got all of these mysterious things, right?

So, an angel of the Lord says to Philip, rise and go south on the road, right?

So, an angel comes and tells Philip to go to some place.

Philip goes and then the Spirit says to Philip, go over and join the chariot.

Well, now why didn't the Spirit tell Philip to go to that place?

And why didn't an angel tell him to get?

And I mean, it's just like, well, okay, so you got a spirit, you got an angel.

Peter: Or why didn't the Spirit just enlighten the Ethiopian eunuch?

David: That's what I'm thinking.

Why didn't the angel just get into the chariot and say, hey, I hear you have some questions about this text, right?

So, we've got these real, and then Philip's whisked away.

So, the whole passage at the beginning, the end, it's just filled with mystery.

And I like the way you put it, the Lord working behind the scenes, right?

So, that there are very, very odd circumstances that are orchestrating how Philip arrives where Philip is.

You know, the chariot's passing by.

I mean, it says it's a desert place and then there's water.

And so, the Ethiopian sees water.

So, somehow in the desert place, the chariot's passing by some water.

I mean, there's just all of this orchestration of events.

But at the center of it is something so common to people talking about the Scriptures.

And it makes you think, you know, maybe the reason an angel didn't appear to the Ethiopian eunuch,

or the Spirit didn't appear to Ethiopian eunuch, or the Lord Himself didn't appear in the chariot with the Ethiopian eunuch,

Ethiopian eunuch is that the Lord wants His people talking with one another about His word.

That's kind of what I'm thinking.

Peter: Well, among the weird things is, I mean, this is something that's probably in a commentary, but where did this guy get the Isaiah the prophet?

David: Right.

Peter: Where did he even get this text?

David: How did he come across that?

Peter: He's reading this text.

He doesn't, you know, it couldn't have been easy to come by back then.

David: Right.

And so it opens up for us this idea that the Lord desires for us to speak to one another about His word.

The Lord equips us for that activity.

The Lord arranges our life experiences so that we run into people where we have an opportunity to witness with them.

And I think it's just a beautiful, a beautiful example of the very simple way in which we share the faith with one another and people grow.

And I think perhaps my favorite part, Jessica, if you could read verse 30 and 31.

Jessica: Oh, good.

That's my favorite part of this.

David: Good.

Jessica: All right.

So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, do you understand what you are reading?

And he said, how can I unless someone guides me?

Amen.

Yes.

That's how I feel.

David: That you want someone to guide you.

Jessica: Yes.

Right.

And I love that God is acknowledging that His word is not easy to understand.

I can't just open up the scroll on my own and figure it out.

David: Yes.

Jessica: And that He sends people to explain it to me.

Okay.

And he said to him, how can I unless someone guides me?

And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

David: I love that word invited.

That the Ethiopian eunuch invites Philip into his chariot.

That Christians, I don't know, our desire is to cultivate a public presence where people would want us to be with them.

Would invite us to be with them and to talk with them about the word.

I think sometimes the public presence we cultivate is often maybe an aggressive stance.

One that is combative.

One that kind of focuses on issues that are fractured and things are torn and lives are bleeding and it's hard to speak in such situations.

And yet there's this desire for us to be such people that others will invite us in to talk to them.

Peter: Yeah, I mean, that's 1 Peter 3, right?

Always be prepared to give a reason to anyone who asks you.

David: Who asks you, right?

Peter: For the hope that you have.

So it implies that people are interested in asking.

And certainly, Philip here was one that the Ethiopian eunuch wanted to invite, wanted to ask.

Jessica: Philip talked to him first though.

It says he ran up to him and asked him.

So he was making himself someone who he would want to be inviting into his chair.

David: Right, yeah.

He was offering, offering to help him.

Do you understand what you're reading?

And I think, you know, there are a lot of things in Scripture that are difficult.

Either difficult to understand because they're technical and we just don't have the cultural information to understand them.

Or difficult because of the message that they bring.

The desire is that there be someone who is able to interpret and walk people through the difficulty so that they can understand the word more fully.

Jessica: That's your job, just so you know.

David: Well, and that's the work of Jesus, right?

That Jesus came and brought God's Word into the flesh.

And became the Word of God in a very real, literal, physical presence among us.

Doing the work of salvation that we might see and understand what it is that God is doing.

And then that then opens up the key to the rest of the Scriptures.

When you understand the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ, everything else begins to start to make sense.

Peter: Well, that's what I've always loved verse 35 in this text too.
In a way verse 35 captures what every preacher does every Sunday.
So verse 35 says,

Then Philip opened his mouth and beginning with the Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus.

You see there the preached word, you see there the written word, you see there the Word made flesh.

Every preacher's job is to open their mouth, begin with the Scripture, and share the good news of Jesus.

That capturing what he said when he sat with him to me is a helpful summary.

David: So it's a text that comforts us with the knowledge that the Lord is in control.

The Lord is working behind the scenes.

The Lord is bringing people together and he's given us his Word, his written Word, the Word enfleshed in Jesus and the Word that we carry orally as we speak to one another about his work of salvation for all people.

And I just think for those reasons that text just stands out as a wonderful testimony of Easter and what is happening during Easter time.

As that Word is breaking forth into the world.

Jessica: Peter, what about you? What would you preach on?

Well, I'm sticking with 1 John throughout this season of Easter.

And this week, 1 John 4 is a pretty familiar passage.

I don't know if you remember that song growing up, Jessica, do you remember that one?

Jessica: Yes, I do know that song.

Peter: Well, this has got some beloved passages, some beloved verses in this section.

Jessica, maybe you could read verses 7-9.

Jessica: Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God.

Whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.

In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.

Peter: I think you go to a congregation, go to your congregation, look around and pay attention to the love that you see.

And I think if I were preaching on this, I'd maybe want to think through some ordinary examples of love that I've seen in the congregation.

I'm thinking about Dave and Jean from my congregation in Minnesota who were an elderly couple who adopted basically a single mom and her two young daughters.

They kind of became the adoptive grandparents of these two little girls.

And they would sit with them in church every Sunday and they would pick them up and take them to school.

And it was just this loving, we didn't have a program, we didn't have, I as the pastor never suggested that.

They just were loving to each other.

You know, I think about examples of one of our elders was a pretty old guy.

And I remember seeing one time he was out shoveling the driveway of an even older neighbor next door to him.

And just these little acts of love. You talked earlier Dave about the cookies.

You actually do see love.

David: Right. I remember a woman who joined a congregation.
She was a Lutheran and she transferred to another Lutheran congregation.
But it was a new city for her, new congregation.
She had just joined and she came down with cancer and she was in the hospital.
And the pastor came in to visit her and there were all of these get well cards that she had had taped to the wall around her.
And she was just in tears and she said, I don't understand. I don't know these people.
And the pastor said to her, but you're family.
You know, you're family because you're part of this church.
And it was just amazing the way in which even like in a program where you send cards to someone who's sick in the hospital,

even then that can communicate this deep love and awaken somebody to the love that's present.
It lets you know that you're surrounded with family of Christ.

Peter: So a temptation, I think with a text like this, this text is all about love, about God being love.
Even if you go to the longer reading in verse 12, it talks about God abiding in us, His love being perfected in us.

The temptation I think for a preacher is to read all this wonderful stuff about love and then to say, but you don't love each other.

David: Right. Yeah.

Peter: And of course, we don't love each other perfectly and our love is always broken and fractured and incomplete.
But I think it might be helpful to acknowledge that as we are led by the Spirit,
as we abide in God and He abides in us, love does come out.

Jessica: So both the 1 John reading and the Gospel of John reading use the word abide.
I think it'd be helpful to us in the pew if you talked a little bit about what that word means.
I don't think that's a word that we normally use.
And then once somebody explained to me that it meant living in something like making your abode,
making your house in something.
And so then when I read that Jesus says He abides in us, that's different.
That opened the door to me.

So that might be something to think about in your sermon.

Peter: I think of abiding as a loyal, permanent, remaining with, staying with,
no matter what comes, I am with you and I will be for you.
I think of all that when I think of abide.
If you do either want to read the longer section in the service or just for your own benefit,
look in verses 12 and 13 and 14 and 15.
You've got the word abide comes up again.
God abides in us in verse 12 and verse 15.
He confesses that Jesus is the Son of God.
God abides in Him.
And so there's this, in the next verse, verse 16,
whoever abides in love abides in God and God abides in Him.
And so this unity and this connection between God loving us and us living in love and faith toward God,

love toward each other and faith toward God,
that's a big concept in John's Gospel and in his letters.

David: The fruits of the Spirit are love.

Peter: Love, right.

So I want to make space to recognize that and to notice that and to rejoice in that love that God shows among us.

Now, of course, because we live in a fallen world, that love is always, always has its limit.

It always has its, it's always a little bit of a distortion.

And so I was thinking about the love that we see at an airport,
the love that we see in a congregation is never quite what it should be.

And my mind went to a negative.

You remember the film, like old film strip?

David: Yeah.

Back when they had the 35 millimeter thing where you'd send your thing off.

David: I remember that.

Peter: You surely remember that, Dave.

But I thought about the love that we see in the world.

It's kind of like the negative of a photo where you can see it, but it's not, it's not right.

There's something off.

You can even, did you guys know this?

I don't know if you have, if you guys are Android or iPhone people, but in the iPhone,

if you click the button three times, you can turn your whole screen into like a negative image.

Oh, you ever seen that?

Jessica: No, I don't have a...

Peter: Let me show, I'll show you right now.

Cause I got my phone with me.

David: Why do they do stuff like this?

Peter: You click it three times in a row and it turns like the negative images.

So it's kind of cool.

Jessica: So everything that was black as white and everything that was red looks like it's blue.

David: This is the type of stuff that happens to me.

And I don't know how it happened.

I don't know how to fix it.

Jessica: Your phone is stuck that way?

Peter: So just in case the young kids don't know what a negative is, maybe that would help.

David: There you go.

Peter:

But you think about a negative image that if you look really carefully and if you try to figure it out,
you can kind of still make out what's going on, but it's not the way it should be.

And so I think what I would like to do in this sermon is somehow rejoice in and name the,
the love that is shown from individuals to individuals, especially in a congregation.

I mean, this is 1 John is mostly written to Christians about how they treat each other.

So I think you've got a good spot to emphasize the love here,

but then to point out that this love that we see all around us that actually is all around us is not,
it's not the true image, the perfect image, the image of what love really is.

David: How cool that this is being written by the beloved disciple, right?

The one who has experienced the true love from Jesus Christ.

Peter: Right. And he's had a whole lifetime to reflect on this love.

David: And to think about it and to see it. Yeah.

Peter: And so this is where the heart of this, the verses that I had you read earlier, Jessica, verse 9. Would you read just verse 9 one more time?

Jessica: In this, the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through Him.

Peter: This is the image of the love of God, that God sent His only Son into the world, that we might live through Him.

So I thought about, you know, images of Jesus loving people.

If I were to ask you to think about what's an image you have from the gospels of Jesus loving people, what image comes to mind?

Jessica: When He would heal people or raise people from the dead, you think of that widow whose only son had died and he came over.

He's like, I'm going to stop this funeral just for her or the little girl that was dead and He took her hand. That's what I think of.

Peter: What about you, Dave? What comes to mind?

David: Well, I mean, this is, I mean, it's sad, right? It's the rich young ruler who walks away.

But we're told that Jesus loved him. Right. Even though he walked away.

Right. Even though he walked away and Jesus was offering a hard word to him that was going to be helpful for him.

And he loved him.

Peter: So the love that Jesus shows, sometimes it's to somebody who's sick or somebody who's dead or to somebody who's grieving, the widow.

Sometimes His love is shown in speaking hard but true and kind, ultimately loving words.

When I thought about the love of Jesus, I thought about, you know, this is in John's gospel.

We're in the season of Easter now. Not long ago we celebrated Maundy Thursday.

David: Right. That's my favorite. Oh, gosh.

Peter: Jesus getting down and washing his disciples feet.

But then I think about His love also. Maybe I'd have in the sermon a little bit of a flashback to Holy Week or something.

Where images of love of Jesus washing His disciples feet.

I think about Him praying for the disciples in the garden.

David: Mm hmm.

Peter: That prayer is an act of love.

He's showing His love. He's manifesting His love for His disciples as He's praying for them as they fall asleep.

And then I think about Jesus hanging on the cross and looking down at His mom.

David: Yeah. Right.

Peter: And saying to John, the beloved, right.

This is the kind of stuff I wonder if when John writes this as an old man.

David: If any of this is coming into his mind.

Peter: If any of this is coming into his mind. He's written the gospel.

Those are all things that he wrote.

And he's caring for His mother on the cross.

And these images of Jesus and His love.

Take your pick. Maybe during the week this week ask members of your congregation to share what's their favorite image of Jesus' love in the gospels.

But ultimately it's this verse 10.

In this is love. Not that we have loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

This love that is all around us in the world to a diminished degree, especially in the church, even though it's not quite right.

But this love of Jesus that is all around us.

It's that then that leads John to say in verse 11,

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

And so I think in some ways that a sermon on this text could be a very, very simple sermon about the love of God.

That is manifest perfectly and purely and clearly in Jesus and his suffering and death and his resurrection.

And this love that then springs up out of the Christian's lives, springs up in the church.

I think about Tertullian once said something to the effect of, pagans look at Christians and they say, see how they love one another?

Jessica: Oh, wouldn't that be nice? That's what the world thought about us. Wouldn't that be great?

Peter: Right. Right. What if the world said, look at how much those people love each other?

So I'd want to invite the congregation to imagine what it would look like for non-Christians in their community to say about them, see how they love each other.

And maybe even invite the, I think it'd be kind of cool to invite the congregation to even write down what that might look like,

draw what that might look like, put it in the offering plate.

And then next week, put that in a newsletter article or a blog post, or maybe if your voter meetings are kind of rough,

begin by sharing, here's what it would look like for people in our community to say, see how they love each other.

And maybe begin each voter's meeting the next year with an image of what your own people have said, this is what it might look like.

And I want to cast these images, I want to acknowledge and name them as beautiful and lovely, even if they're still kind of a negative of the love that God has for us in Christ.

And so they always fall short. And for that reason, we always approach this concept of love with a repentant heart

because our love is never pure.

But God's love does abide in us and it comes out in our life together.

And I want to encourage that as our response to the love that God has shown us in Christ.

Jessica: Thanks, guys. That's all for today.

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