

Sermon for May 2, 2021

Readings: Acts 8:26-40

26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south^[a] to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. **27** And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship **28** and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. **29** And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." **30** So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" **31** And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. **32** Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.

33 In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth."

34 And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" **35** Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. **36** And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?"^[b] **38** And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. **39** And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. **40** But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Gospel: John 15:1-8

I Am the True Vine

15 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. **2** Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. **3** Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. **4** Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. **5** I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. **6** If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. **7** If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. **8** By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

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This morning, let us proclaim the message that connects the lesson in Acts, the account of the Ethiopian eunuch, and the gospel of John, the illustration of the vine and the branches.

There is an idea that connects these two stories. They are paired with each other intentionally. The pairing is somewhat artificial. And by that I mean, someone, somewhere, at some time, made the decision that these two stories would be read together on the 5th Sunday of Easter. Tradition dictates that during the season of Easter readings from the Book of Acts will replace the Old Testament readings. And the Gospel of John will be read from during the High Holidays, while the rest of the year will feature either Matthew, Mark or Luke, depending on what series we are in that year. This year we are in Series B. Mark. But you will notice that the Gospel reading is from John, because we are in Easter. That’s how the lectionary works.

Whoever it was who put these two stories together had some thinking behind it. And they fit these two stories together because they say something. They must harmonize somehow, that's the intention. When two or more notes are in harmony, they strike a chord. Sometimes that chord is familiar and easy to identify, sometimes not so much, leaving us to ask, “What were they thinking?”

It's fair to say God is saying something to us in Acts; and then ask ourselves if God is saying the same thing in the Gospel of John. And if so, just what is the unifying message? Just as I ring this bell, I can make this other bell ring in sympathy. And I think these two stories are very much ringing the same note.

And that note is one of being connected to Jesus. Not just on the surface but down to the root, the core of who you are. Because apart from Jesus you cannot live. As a sinner, your destination is the burn pile.

Let’s use that lens to look at the first story. The Eunuch asks a question of identity... Who is the Prophet talking about? Himself or someone else? And immediately, he is

connected with our Savior. A seed is planted by the word of God and it is immediately watered. And the Eunuch grows in Christ.

Let's look at the Gospel this way. Jesus identifies his relationship to us. He is the Vine and we are the branches. "Remain in me and grow, bear fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing."

In the first story the movement appears to run from the Saint to the Savior. It appears to be the Eunuch who initiates the contact between them. "Here is water, why should I not be baptized?" Saying in effect that I want to be connected to Jesus.

In the second story (our gospel reading), the movement runs the other direction, from the Savior to the Saint.

"You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me." Saying in effect that your life begins and ends with me. It is Jesus who initiates the relationship.

Although, as I said, the eunuch appears to initiate the relationship through his request for baptism, if we look closer, once again it is Jesus who initiates this relationship. The Angel of the Lord sends Philip down the Gaza road, where he will encounter a carriage with an important official. He is told to stay near that carriage until the opportunity presents itself. God was seeking the eunuch all along. He was seeking him before the eunuch was even aware of who the God was, that he had been worshipping.

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch is important for a number of reasons. Any of those reasons are worthy of a sermon. But we are focusing on the lesson that connects story A with story B. And the framework for that story is being connected to Jesus.

We are introduced to a complete outsider. He is an outsider on so many levels--he's a gentile, and a castrated individual who can't have children on his own. And this was very possibly a choice he made. It was not uncommon in the East for a man who was faced with limited options to choose to become a eunuch in order to better his position in life. As the official who was the head of the treasury of Candice, Queen of the Ethiopians, his life could be pretty comfortable. Depending on your perspective, it could be a pretty good life. For some people, it might be seen as worth the trade. But not everyone would view it that way. We don't know his story, but at some point he must have become acquainted with the God of the Jews. Quite possibly while he had been in Jerusalem he had been worshipping. In any case, he now had in his possession a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. And he was reading it aloud, indicating that he was both educated and literate.

Again moved by the Spirit, Phillip inquires if he understands what he is reading. The eunuch answers that he does not. He is confused over the identity of the person the Prophet is talking about. If the Prophet is talking about a man being led to his death and killed he can't possibly be referring to himself, because he would have to be alive in order to write the prophesy. But the man in the story is clearly dead. It doesn't make sense. "Can you explain this to me?"

Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

Now that the connection has been made... and notice it was the word of God that made it...the new-born Christian asks to be baptized. Put the name of this God on me!

What do we call baptism? God's work. Our Lord brought him into the vine. He provided a baptismal relationship which made him welcome in the community, treated as a son and as an heir of the kingdom. Grafting him in. Just as we are grafted in. The account in Acts shows us an outsider who became an insider and how that worked through practical theology.

"Here is water, why should I not be baptized?" Baptism isn't theoretical. It's practical. It does something. It connects us through the word of God. But it's applied with water.

The account of the Vine and Branches in the Gospel of John tells us how things work too. Call it doctrinal theology, the teaching that Jesus Christ is the root of our salvation. Or maybe it IS *practical* theology. You want to survive all this? Remain in the Vine.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me." That is very practical theology.

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. keep my commands, just as I have kept my Father's commands. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.

And gave myself up for you."

That is the nature of the God who loves us, who sacrifices himself for us, The loving gardener who seeks us and plants his word in us, who gives water to it and encourages his people to grow.

