

Easter 5B. April 29, 2018. Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim, WA. Acts 8:26-40, I John 4:7-21, John 15:1-8 "About someone else, or about me?"

Acts 8:26-40

26Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south

to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) 27So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court

official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship 28and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." 30So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" 31He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 32Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

"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."

34The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" 35Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 36As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" 38He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 39When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. 40But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the

region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

John 15:1-8

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

“Is he talking about himself, or about someone else, or about me?”

The traveling man in today’s first lesson is touched personally by the words of the prophet Isaiah.

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter”....well, that had been his fate, sometime in his boyhood. He had been sheared. Now they call him “half a man,” “In his humiliation, justice was denied him.” That was for sure too. “Who can describe his generation?” In other words, what are his descendants like? One will never know, for he cannot have children. “His life is taken away from the earth.” In ancient times, people were presumed to be forgotten if they died without children to carry on their name and their beliefs.

“The man who wrote this scroll is talking about ME!” thought the man in the chariot.

Suddenly Philip, recently chosen deacon of the early church, appears and asks the man in the chariot if he understands the scroll he is reading. He offers to explain and that explanation changes the traveler's life.

As the hours pass and Philip relates the story of Jesus, try to imagine the intense joy of this traveler and the commitment of Philip. Not that long ago, he too had been confused by the scriptures. Now he could share the story of Jesus that suddenly made sense of it all.

The Ethiopian traveler had suffered in ways we cannot imagine. But one thing is sure: he has risen to the top in the court of his government. He is in command of the queen's entire treasury. How hard he must have worked to achieve this, how despised he was by many, how shamed and sad he might have been in his inward life.

He asks to be baptized – to be accepted. The old Jewish faith did not accept him; Gentiles and people unable to bear children were not allowed in the temple. Besides he was a foreigner and of another race. But this Jesus, and his disciple Philip, DID accept him. There were no conditions – you didn't have to be rich or famous or smart or particularly holy or anything else. You didn't have to succeed above all others to achieve some dignity. Imagine those two men splashing that baptismal water in the middle of the desert and giving thanks for such a God, for such grace.

I wonder how long it took for our traveler to sob the shame and sadness away so Jesus could replace it with the rejoicing that is reported in our text. I do not wonder that he became a follower of the One who carried the shame and brokenness of all humanity, and who loved even those who sinned against him, and who lives to offer us all abundant life.

Tradition tells us that the ancient Christian church in Ethiopia that still exists today owes its birth and sustenance to the Holy Spirit working through Philip and our courtly traveler.

We might ask if the lessons of this story pertain to us today. A relationship between Philip and the African traveler had everything going against it – according to worldly standards of social interaction. But the Holy Spirit drove them together. Joyful communication led to a blessed end and blessings down the ages. Forces today seek to divide us from people different from us. We encounter few refugees, few people of color, few

people experiencing homelessness, few foreigners, few minimum wage workers, few people with political views different from our own. But they are all around. Walls and boundaries are placed between groups to divide, to supposedly protect.

This story, however, shows that we can be united with everyone on this earth under the umbrella of God's love; that we are called to unity with diversity not to unity only through uniformity; that we are enriched by encounters with people different from ourselves. These are values Jesus and the early Christians taught; they are values that often have been taken on by our country; they are values that are always in jeopardy and that we are called daily to uphold.

"Is he talking about himself, or about someone else, or about me?"

Isaiah was talking about himself, about Israel, about Jesus, about Philip and the Ethiopian AND about YOU and me.

The story of salvation, of course begins before time itself in the heart of God, but we read of it in the ancient Hebrew scriptures; we see it fulfilled in Jesus; and marvel as it works its way through the lives of all of us who hear it. If we were fortunate, someone taught us this story when we were little kids. We didn't have to be traveling in a foreign country, seeking meaning from an esoteric scroll, to learn about Jesus. BUT, for many of us, this love story did first enter our hearts in our later years.

Someone was there to "mother" us into faith, to give meaning to the ancient words and stories, to put flesh and bones onto the name of Christ Jesus, to provide the Holy Spirit with a place to work. For that witness we give thanks.

I once was trying to help a confirmation student grasp the unconditional love that God holds for us. He suggested, "sort of like a mom?"

Yes, I said. Like a good and perfect mother.

A very beautiful image has remained in my mind's eye since my college days. It was in the "Family of Man" photography collection from the 60s. The picture showed a tall African woman holding the hands of two

young children. None of them are smiling, but you get the feeling that they are well. The caption to the photo is this: She is a tree of life to them.

This picture provides a fine illustration of the Gospel for today, where Jesus calls himself the true vine. Like a mother, father or a grandma, grandpa or a teacher holding the children by the hand, Jesus assures us, his children, life under his protection. Values and sustenance pass from the vine to the branches, from his mouth to our ear, from strong hand to weak hand; like the African mother, he is willing to do anything to save the children from harm.

I am the true vine and my Father is the vinegrower, says Jesus. Together we will bear some fruit. By Jesus' word and life, he has cleansed us and presented us to his Father as intimately connected to him as a branch is to a vine.

Is he talking about me? YES! You yourself – broken, sad, shamed or sinner, you can name the poison. And he is talking about you yourself – accepted, joyful, saint and bearer of fruit!

If you're able to nurture a young person or a person new to faith, if you're a mom or a dad, or a grandparent, or an aunt or uncle, or a teacher or a good neighbor, you have blessed work! Just like Philip loved and nurtured the traveling seeker into faith, you too can tell the story. Little ones haven't heard it yet. Older ones may need to hear it again. Start by asking God to prune your life into a loving, authentic expression worth sharing. And ask God to guide and direct you from there. And you young ones, sometimes your parents and older folks need to hear YOUR Gospel telling as much or more as you need theirs!!

How joyful to find that God's accepting love is indeed possible, that boundaries between people different from one another are broken down, and that the goodness God puts in you is indeed worth passing on.

Throughout our lives we face all kinds of challenges, like the Ethiopian traveler and Philip did, like every parent and nurturer does. And, in all these circumstances and life changes, we abide in Christ and he in us, for we have been marked with his cross. Our Baptism is the blessed spring which connects us forever to the mystery of being branches of the Vine, of being Jesus' beloved brothers and sisters.

“Is the preacher talking about herself, or about someone else, or about you?”

Yes. All of the above. To God be the glory! Amen.