

0B Easter 5 4.28.24

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

Focus Statement: Jesus never stops working on us.

We're going to get to Jesus as the true vine, but I want to start by talking about the Acts reading. We've been reading Acts throughout the Easter season, so let's catch up just briefly. Acts is the story of the spreading of the early church after Jesus' ascension.

Basically, Acts is what it looked like when Jesus' words to his disciples came true, and they were led by the Holy Spirit to continue in Jesus' work, glorifying God, to reference this morning's Gospel. We've been reading the passages where that work was going well, when "there was not a needy person among" the followers of Jesus because of their communal hospitality and their bold preaching. But there were also times where things were not going so great. There were people trying to hide their finances, a Greek-speaking group complained that their widows were not receiving enough resources, and persecution was growing, especially from a young zealot named Saul who took part in the execution of Stephen, one of the deacons responsible for food distribution. The life of the early church was, in a word, tumultuous. It was in this setting that Philip was sent by an angel of the Lord to, of all places, a rural desert road running from Jerusalem to Gaza at noon. A deserted desert road in the heat of the day is not a prime place to find potential converts to the movement. Or any people at all, to be frank.

But find a person Philip does, as he was passed on the road by a traveler. And not just any traveler, the chief treasury officer to "the queen of the Ethiopians." Who had been in Jerusalem not on a diplomatic mission, but because he had been visiting Jerusalem on a pilgrimage, to worship Israel's God. And, not only that, but he'd somehow acquired a scroll

of the prophet Isaiah, no cheap acquisition in the time before the printing press, when anything written had to be copied by hand, and he was reading it as he traveled along. Wealthy, powerful, already interested enough in Judaism to be worshiping and studying the word of God. This guy seems like prime conversion material.

There is only one problem here. The NRSV translation leaves out a word in verse twenty-seven. In Greek, the traveler is described as “a man, an Ethiopian eunuch.” This is a bold claim because by the cultural practices of the time, one could not be a man and a eunuch. A eunuch, by definition, was a non-man. He wasn’t a woman either, he was something else entirely. Genderless in a culture defined by specific gendered norms. And, like today, this posed problems for him. He was rich, he was powerful, he was the treasurer over all the riches of Ethiopia, and yet there were still doors closed to him, places unsafe or unwelcome to him, because he could not be identified as fully he. One of those closed doors would have been parts of the temple in Jerusalem where he had just come from worshiping. As a eunuch, he would have been confined to the outer edges of the temple, barred from the most sacred spaces. Before we get too far into this, let me make clear, this was not a religious issue, this isn’t about Judaism’s stance on gender justice, this was/is a cultural issue, a social issue. I point this out to remind us that we have not evolved all that much in two-thousand years, and fights over gender happened then, and they happen now, in places of worship, schools, businesses, and government offices. It is familiar baggage Philip encountered when he heard the prophet Isaiah and chased down a chariot on the road.

Philip approached the man and asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" This was a loaded question, because the section he was reading was Isaiah chapter fifty-three, verses seven and eight. This is "an evocative passage about a shorn, scorned, shamed sheep-like figure to whom "justice" and "generation (descendants)" were denied." So the eunuch asked Philip, "about whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" This was an intensely loaded personal question for the man to ask, because as a eunuch, he was one who had been denied justice, stigmatized for his own inability to have children, cut off from full participation in the religious community he had just returned from worshiping. Unless, that is, there could be a different way to read Isaiah.

In response to this question, Philip "starting with [the Isaiah] scripture, proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus." Jesus, who as part of his teaching, rather than rewrite scriptures, opened people's hearts and minds to new ways of understanding God's sacred word. Ways that were inclusive, rather than the exclusive tilt that humanity wants to place around them. I say humanity because remember, this is not a Jewish problem. We as Christians are not more enlightened than those of the Jewish faith because we have Jesus. This is a people problem. Christianity in our two-thousand-year history has no better track record on this issue than first century Pharisees and scribes did. What Philip did here wasn't throw out Isaiah, instead he demonstrated how Isaiah was reading the Law of Moses to better reflect God's promise to Abraham that he was blessed to be a blessing to all people, and all people means ALL PEOPLE. Not just those who fit within some social norm of gender or sexuality.

So caught up in this promise was the eunuch that when they came across “some water.” Which let’s point out, they’re in the desert at noon. Some water is in and of itself an evangelistic miracle, and likely a pretty pathetic puddle, nothing sweeping or majestic. But there’s water, and the eunuch proclaimed, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” Nothing, Philip acknowledged, and the two went to the water where the eunuch was baptized, “and went on his way rejoicing” because in Philip’s unpacking of the prophet Isaiah, the man who had been outcast found his humanity recognized.

Dear people of God, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is a story about how we are compelled by the word of God to break down all barriers that keep people from being fully included in the kingdom of God. Paul was still Saul at this point, but he will eventually declare in Galatians, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female,” all categories that historically and still today have been used to bar people from inclusion among the faithful, “for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

So that’s the good news. Here’s the challenge. We didn’t just read Acts this morning, we also read the Gospel of John, where Jesus said to his disciples, “I 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.” So far, so good. But Jesus went on. “Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” This is a tricky passage to pair with the Acts passage because we just saw the answer to the question, “what is to prevent me from being baptized” was the eunuch’s

immediate baptism in a puddle. If anyone can be baptized, what's this verse from Jesus about cutting off branches and throwing them into the fire?

This, dear people of God, to use some fancy churchy words, is the difference between justification and sanctification. Translated into English, the difference between being saved by grace through faith in Jesus, apart from anything we do, and learning to live with the consequences of that salvation. And those consequences are, we who have been saved have an obligation to love and care for fellow members of God's kingdom. To "feed God's sheep," to use another line from the Gospel of John. To make sure that, like Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch, all people know that they are not just welcome in, but a part of, the family of God. There is the temptation for promises as good as salvation for people to want to set the bar high, here are all the standards you must meet to be part of the kingdom of God. But once you've met the entrance requirements, wahoo. You can sit back and laugh at all those struggling to earn entrance. In Jesus we see the exact opposite. Entrance into the kingdom of God is barrier-free, through Christ's death and resurrection we trip in. And now that we are in, now that we are here, there is work to be done in helping others know their worth. Not because that work is necessary for us to earn our place, but because once you have come to understand the unconditional grace and love of God through Jesus, how else can we respond but through paying forward that love to others?

This, dear people of God, is hard. I've been dancing around "other churches" who "aren't as open" all sermon. But here's the truth. I can preach the Ethiopian eunuch here, because at Trinity, the full inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and gender expressions is a

forgone conclusion. There are churches where I could not preach so openly about LGBTQIA topics, here, I know I can. But, if we're honest with ourselves, there are groups who if I in a sermon said, the kingdom of God also includes these people, you would squirm a little bit. At least, I can't speak for you, but I can speak for me, there are groups of people for whom it would be hard for me to declare, they too are beloved children of God. But the scriptures proclaim to me that they are because all people, even the once I don't like, are made in the image of God. I remember talking with a friend in college, a fellow progressive Christian, and making some wise crack about conservative Christians. I expected her to get on board with my mockery, but instead she challenged me, "Kjersten, are you not doing the exact same thing to them you are accusing them of doing to others." Ouch. And I found myself, to return us to the Gospel reading, pruned, so that I could bear better fruit.

That is, I think, dear people of God, the ultimate good news message in this passage about bearing fruit and pruning. That ours is a God who loves us so much that God tears down every barrier we may try to erect between ourselves or others and God. And, that within that relationship, God is not content to leave us where we are at, but is continually at work, pruning us to be ripe for the harvest of good fruit. Dear people of God, so deep is God's love for us that God will stop at nothing to make sure we are living out the full vision of who God has created us to be. We are all works in progress, tended by the hands of the vine grower who wants nothing but for us to be the most fruitful branches we can be. Thanks be to God who not only includes us, but never stops bringing out the best in us. Amen.