

Fifth Sunday of Easter – Year B – Vine & Branches

There is a lesson God keeps trying to teach us, one we repeatedly do not hear fully. The lesson – the Word from the Lord – is this: we all belong. We all belong.

In the first chapter of the book of Acts, verse 8, Jesus tells the disciples that the Holy Spirit will empower them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and then in Judea, and in Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth! And that is more or less what the book of Acts chronicles for us – the Spirit empowering the disciples to be witnesses. But at the same time, Luke – who wrote *Acts* as the sequel to his gospel – is showing us what other havoc that same Holy Spirit causes in the lives of those who are so empowered! Luke shows us again and again how God stretches the early followers of Jesus beyond where they thought the boundaries were...especially boundaries about who belongs and who does not.

This morning's text tells us of Philip. This Philip was one of the ones chosen, along with Stephen, to help the apostles in their ministry – the origin of the order we now call deacons. After Stephen was stoned to death for preaching the gospel, we're told that Philip went to *Samaria* and preached the gospel and healed the sick there – just as Jesus had said they should, yes? And the next thing we hear about Philip is our text for this morning. An angel of the Lord – or the Holy Spirit – tells Philip to get up and go...and Philip got up and went! Where? On a wilderness road...*toward* Gaza – but with no real destination. Just “get up and go” – down a road in the wilderness...and Philip went. And there, on the road, he encounters an Ethiopian eunuch on his way home from having been in Jerusalem to worship.

The man was probably a Jew – there had been Jews in Ethiopia for some time – and he has a copy of the scroll of Isaiah. But what he would have encountered in Jerusalem when he went to worship – well, that would have depended on where he went, and how he intended to worship. In the book of Deuteronomy, you see, the law says that eunuchs are not permitted to be part of the assembly in worship. But in the book of the prophet Isaiah, written much later, God says:

Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,
“The LORD will surely separate me from his people”;
and do not let the eunuch say,
“I am just a dry tree.”

For thus says the LORD:
To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
 who choose the things that please me
 and hold fast my covenant,
I will give, in my house and within my walls,
 a monument and a name
 better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
 that shall not be cut off.

You see, all along there has been disagreement about who is in, and who is out – who belongs, and who does not.

Knowing this – knowing what this dark skinned, well-educated, and well-placed but out-of-town eunuch may have experienced when he went to the temple to worship – the passage he is reading from Isaiah is important:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,
 and like a lamb silent before its shearer,
 so he does not open his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.
 Who can describe his generation?
 For his life is taken away from the earth.”

He is reading about one to whom justice was denied... whose life was taken away. We can imagine that this man may have been feeling a bit of this himself... And I certainly heard echoes of all the recent killings in our own day...

Now the Spirit tells Philip to go over and join the chariot. *How* Philip manages to run fast enough to come alongside the chariot AND have enough breath to ask a question is left to our imagination...but he asks this court official if he understands what he is reading... a fairly gutsy question – but one that gets Philip an invitation to take a seat beside this official in the chariot. And Philip then tells this man the good news of Jesus – the “good news” of the gospel. It is the eunuch who then asks the question of the moment: Look – here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized? What indeed? And it is the *eunuch* who stops the chariot so the two of them can go down into the water. – And when they come up *out* of the water, Philip is snatched away by the same pesky Spirit who initiated it all.

The eunuch *understood* what he was reading from Isaiah, and what Philip told him about Jesus, very well. He understood that *he belonged*. And Philip – Philip learned that the ends of the earth just keep moving – that the Holy Spirit keeps stretching the church beyond whatever limits she constructs, tearing down whatever walls we may build, so that we may keep working to learn that lesson: we *all* belong.

It's what Jesus said last week – there are other sheep out there not in “our fold” – and they are part of the flock, too – and he is shepherd of us all. Today, we hear Jesus use another metaphor – that he is the vine, and we are the branches. The same God-life, the *sap* that runs through the vine runs also to the branches – and there it bears fruit. So long as we remain connected – so long as we *abide* in Jesus – we will bear fruit.

“Abide in me as I abide in you,” Jesus tells us. And the epistle from First John – a commentary on John's gospel if you will – carries on with that image. “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”

And that takes us right back to Isaiah – to the passage that our friend the eunuch would have gotten to – the one where God says:

To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
who choose the things that please me
and hold fast my covenant, -- WHO ABIDE IN ME
I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.

Yes, the place where God says “all y'all” belong. And it takes us to the Spirit-stretching events detailed in the Acts of the Apostles – including our passage from this morning – where the boundaries of who is in and who is out gets stretched from Jew to Samaritan to Gentile, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, from the requirements of the law to the requirements of love... all to speak again this lesson God so long for us to learn: We all belong.

“Abide in me, as I abide in you.” Abide – it can mean “live with or in” – I abide at Emmaus – or to choose to follow, as in I will abide by the rules. We are best served to observe both definitions, I think – and I would add the qualifier that to “abide” also carries intentional presence. It involves my choosing, very intentionally.

And so to *Abide* in Jesus – to Abide in Love – means to consciously LIVE there – *and* to choose to follow – to abide by - the ‘rule’ of Love. And there – in love – my friends, we all belong. It *is* the same lesson over and over again.

We will pray in our closing hymn today, asking the Lord to abide with us... The good news is this: God already abides in us, if only we can abide – truly abide – in love.

May it be so. Amen.

- [Acts 8:26-40](#)
- [1 John 4:7-21](#)
- [John 15:1-8](#)
- [Psalm 22:24-30](#)