

I want to spend a little time today looking
at two of our scripture readings.
During the Easter Season instead of readings
from the Old Testament,
we have readings from the Acts of the Apostles,
and instead of the Gospel of Mark,
which we are hearing this year,
we have readings from the Gospel of John.

This reading from the Acts of the Apostles involves the Deacon Philip.
At least, that's who we think is involved.
Now there was an Apostle named Philip,
but that's probably not who we read about in Acts.
This Philip first appears as one of the seven,
along with Stephen who is martyred,
who are set apart for service in the first century church.

According to the book, when Saul, who became Paul,
was persecuting the church,
the apostles and deacons scattered
to avoid being caught up in the persecution.

Listen to this account of Philip's work
in the early part of chapter 8:

"Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed the
Messiah to them. The crowds with one accord listened eagerly to
what was said by Philip, hearing and seeing the signs that he did,
for unclean spirits, crying with loud shrieks, came out of many
who were possessed; and many others who were paralyzed or lame
were cured. So there was great joy in that city.

Now a certain man named Simon had previously practiced magic
in the city and amazed the people of Samaria, saying that he was
someone great. All of them, from the least to the greatest, listened
to him eagerly, saying, "This man is the power of God that is called
Great." And they listened eagerly to him because for a long time he

had amazed them with his magic. But when they believed Philip, who was proclaiming the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Even Simon himself believed. After being baptized, he stayed constantly with Philip and was amazed when he saw the signs and great miracles that took place.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.” [NRSV]

There is more to this part of the story,
but you can see that Philip was a pretty outstanding evangelist.

Then we have the episode we heard in our lessons today.

It follows a few verses later in the 8th chapter.

Three things jumped out at me in the reading.

First, an angel of the Lord said to Philip,
get up and go...so he got up and went.

Second, The Spirit said to Philip,
go over to this chariot...so Philip ran up to it,
and third, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away...
but Philip found himself a Azotus.

Luke, the probable author of the Acts of the Apostles
and the Gospel according to Luke,

places a great emphasis on the Holy Spirit.

This episode is a perfect example of it.

The Spirit puts Philip in a place to meet the Ethiopian eunuch,
but more than that the episode teaches the church
a very critical lesson.

It is a lesson that Luke teaches in two other places
in the Acts of the Apostles.

The second is the encounter between Peter and Cornelius,
where Peter learns that there is to be no restrictions
on conversion,

and the third is the result of the Council at Jerusalem
where the church put no restraints
on the conversion of Gentiles
or anybody else for that matter.

The lessons were for the early Christian community,
and it is a lesson for us too.

Pastor Susan Langhauser of Advent Lutheran Church in Olathe, KS
captures the scene between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch well.
She says:

”Philip is told to witness to... a four-time loser: he’s Egyptian
(wrong nationality) he’s black (wrong race,) he’s a Gentile (wrong
religion) and he’s a eunuch (wrong gender-identification!) This
man of importance and status has made the journey all the way to
Jerusalem to worship at the temple. For perfectly lawful reasons,
he would not have been allowed to join the club; in fact, he would
have been given a cold reception in Jerusalem and would certainly
not have had the chance to be heard. Like many seekers, the
“church” had let him down. Yet he continues his studies, by
reading the book of Isaiah (which, by the way was Jesus’ scroll of
preference.) It’s what he was reading that is important.

“...like a lamb silent before its shearer,
so he does not open his mouth.

In his humiliation, justice was denied him.”

The eunuch asks Philip who this is talking about, and Philip
proclaims the good news that this is Jesus, the Son of God, who
has experienced a life of silence in the face of injustice, and knows
first-hand about humiliation. It is at this point that the eunuch’s

heart is moved. To be loved by a God who can understand the outcast—who embraces and erases the fears that humanity loves to hold over one another. That is what caused the eunuch to seek baptism by water in the middle of the desert—he had found a God who could know him inside out and love him regardless.”¹

Philip probably never heard of the Gospel of John.

Dating of the Acts of the Apostles

and of the Gospel of John is imprecise,
but I think the ideas and experiences of the Gospel writers
and the witnesses of the early evangelists
carry over to today’s Gospel account.

This is one of the “I am” statements of Jesus.

There are five in the Gospel.

Jesus says:

I am the bread of life,
I am the light of the world,
I am the Good Shepherd,
I am the Way, the Truth and the Life,
and I am the true vine.

Most of us aren’t grape farmers and winemakers,
but we know little about wine.

In fact, we know a lot about wine and a lot about bread.

Susan Palo Cherwien says this about this part of John’s Gospel:

“the more I look at this specific text in chapter 15, contemplate its placement in John’s Gospel, and analyze the structure of John’s writing, the more I come to believe that this key text is associated with the Lord’s Supper—and with the community gathered around Christ. John wants to impart how Christ, the Word made flesh, is going to continue to act in the world since the death, resurrection, and leave-taking of Christ.

¹ Susan Langhauser, “Life without Fear” Lectionary Homiletics, www.goodpreacher.com

Jesus' statement in verse 5 is one of the "I am" pronouncements unique to John's Gospel. In chapter 6, after the feeding of the 5,000 near Capernaum, Jesus declares, "I am the bread of life." Now, in chapter 15 in Jerusalem, after the supper and the washing of the disciples' feet, Jesus declares, "I am the true vine." In chapter 6, Jesus continues: "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them." Then to chapter 15 again: "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. . . . As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love."

I am the bread of life; abide in me, and I in you. I am the true vine; abide in me, and I in you. The "you" in these passages is plural. Perhaps we would say that this is obvious, but we often tend to read scripture from a very personal, individualistic viewpoint.

Christ Jesus is here talking about community. Jesus has fed the 5,000 people: "I am the bread of life." Jesus has washed the disciples' feet and given a new commandment, to love one another: "I am the true vine." Jesus is addressing the eleven disciples; John seems to be addressing the worshiping community of the young church. Through tradition and the history of the church, we sense it as being addressed to us. The "you" is plural.
[Of course, we could use the second person plural "y'all.]"

The Word has been made flesh in Jesus the Christ. Now the Word will be made flesh through those who gather around Christ in the meal, in the community of believers.

There is no mistaking this: Christ is the true grapevine and we are the climbing, twining branches. Not just some generic vining plant but *vitis vinifera*, the fruiting grapevine that produces wine. *Vitis*, the botanical name for grape, is etymologically related to the word *vita*, life. I am the true vine; you are the branches...

You are the branches. The power of love and abundant life that flows from God into Christ flows also into the community that gathers around Christ and partakes of Christ. Who can tell exactly where the vine stops and the branches begin? To what loving energy does the community have access through this deep and abiding connection?

Through this connection to the vine of life, the community is filled with the creative, loving, and merciful energy of God, that same love that flowed through Christ. And because of this creative and loving connection, we will bear fruit. Christly fruit; godly fruit...

So the worshiping community gathered around Christ is nourished by Christ. It is the very energy of God that flows through the community. (I in them, and you in me. . . . Abide in my love.) And the branches, thus nourished, produce fruit. Fruit for the life of the world, for the ongoing becoming of the universe, for the becoming of human community. That the Word made flesh in Christ may again be made flesh in the world.

Christ is the true grapevine. We are the branches. We are to bear fruit according to our nature, which is God's love incarnate in Christ, offered for the life of the world."²

The Deacon Philip took the essence of these words into his life.

He became the branches of the true vine,
and he made a huge difference in the life of the Ethiopian eunuch.

And in turn Luke teaches us a very critical lesson.

No one, absolutely no one is outside God's tent.

There is no wrong nationality,
no wrong race,

² Susan Palo Cherwein, "Living the Word May 3 Fifth Sunday of Easter, Christian Century, April 29, 2015, p. 20.

no wrong religion,
no wrong gender-identification!
Jesus said I am the bread of life; I am the true vine.
Come to this table and receive the life giving bread
and life giving fruit of the vine,
receive the Body of Christ, the Bread of Heaven
and the Blood of Christ, the cup of salvation.

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