

Sermon: Bear Fruit
New North Church, Hingham
Rev. Steven M. Aucella
2 May 2021

Based on **Acts 8:26-40; John 15:1-8**

Like the Ethiopian eunuch, we sometimes ask ourselves, what does this piece of Scripture mean, or this phrase, or even this word? Sometimes we need guidance or maybe just a conversation with others to help us out. And when help appears, do we ever imagine, wow, that's the Holy Spirit at work. Because that's what happened with Philip and the Ethiopian on the road down to Gaza.

Modern-day authorities on gender studies focus on the Ethiopian being a eunuch because eunuchs are sexually ambiguous, and Luke mentions it five times. Luke could have called him the Ethiopian, or the court official, or even the treasurer, but he chose *eunuch*. Is Luke trying to make a point here? We don't know.

We do know that this new convert to the faith, a powerful and important person in the Ethiopian court, was interested in Jewish religion. Given his dual status as a eunuch and a Gentile, he couldn't participate fully. He couldn't enter the Temple, for example, but he could listen in, and we know he was devoted, because it's a long way from Ethiopia to Jerusalem in a chariot. Ethiopia was at the very end of the known world as far as Israel was concerned at the time, so being an Ethiopian eunuch marked this man as the most foreign of the foreign. That may have been Luke's point.

In Acts, chapter one, just before Jesus ascended into Heaven, he told the disciples, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Hello, Ethiopia. So, for Luke's readers, the Ethiopian is the least likely person to be reading Hebrew Scripture and asking questions about it. But he's actually the ideal convert because he's already interested. He wants to know more. He seeks guidance. And then along came the Holy Spirit and Philip.

The command to get up and go toward Gaza came to Philip from God, and from there the Holy Spirit took the initiative to get Philip over to the Ethiopian's chariot. Philip merely acted as God's hands and feet in proclaiming the good news about Jesus.

Some scholars feel that Luke's translation of Isaiah might have been slanted toward the eunuch, meaning he might see himself in that passage. But most Christians, reading the words that Isaiah wrote, see only Jesus in them. Isaiah begins by saying:

“He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.” (Isaiah 53:7b-8)

And that's Philip's starting point for proclaiming the good news about Jesus.

Whether you are the Other, as the Ethiopian was in Philip's eyes, or a member of a privileged group, as the Ethiopian was in his own context, we can ask ourselves, ‘Who are the people nearest me that the Spirit is pressing me to get to know, or appreciate, or maybe even join?’¹

Luke's theology is one of inclusion of the marginalized; it's about reconciliation and building up the faith community. God's love wants to push us out of our comfort zone, at least for a little while every now and then, and toward an appreciation of and an ability to see things in our world that we may have otherwise overlooked.

Too often during the week, I have my head down getting ready for Sunday and if I don't get out of the house, I won't notice that my neighbor built a retaining wall, or that a house lot around the corner was recently cleared of trees. I won't notice that I haven't spoken to some old friends lately or haven't even made new ones.

The Spirit can't push me and say, “Go over there and help that guy” if I'm not there and available to help. If I'm only focused on my stuff and not otherwise bearing fruit for the vine, then I'm not available to let the Spirit work through me. I'm not abiding in Jesus in that moment.

It's a lot of work to be available one hundred percent of the time, but I have a cell phone; I have email. I'm on call as a chaplain at South Shore Hospital one week a month but I'm not physically at the hospital unless they need me. Sometimes, it's just a matter of being in the right place at the right time and being aware when the Spirit taps you on the shoulder.

Jesus said, “Abide in me as I abide in you.” The English word *abide* can mean ‘to endure,’ as in our cats Fred and Maggie saying, “We can’t *abide* a mouse in the house.” It can also mean ‘to remain,’ which is how John means it here. True believers *abide* where false believers do not.

John also uses a plural version of *you* throughout this passage. The overall effect, if we lived in Alabama, would be Jesus saying, “Abide in me as I abide in all y’all.”

It’s a group thing, as all things are when it comes to faith. Remaining in Jesus is not just a private practice as it applies to each prayerful individual disciple, but it also applies mutually to the entire faith community together.

When Jesus said that when God the vine grower *prunes* every branch that bears fruit, the Greek word used by John means *to cleanse*. When Jesus said, “You have already been *cleansed* by the word that I have spoken,” John used the very same word. Maybe cleansing a branch didn’t make sense to the translators, but there it is.

Either way, pruning a grape vine or an olive branch, or a rose bush, clears away the dead branches so the plant can devote its energy to the fruit-bearing branches and prepare for a productive yield. John’s audience would see pruning as a necessary and good activity for healthy crops. The symbolic meaning would not have been lost on them: pruning is an act of love and doing so enriches our lives.

Spreading the good news about Jesus is *always* about crossing boundaries. The first Christians took their call seriously to care for the poor, the widows and orphans, and for everyone in need.

By these acts of love, the movement spread throughout the Mediterranean and into the Roman Empire. The movement spread through people like Philip who heeded the Spirits’ nudge to go talk to the Ethiopian about Scripture.

We abide in Jesus as Jesus abides in us. We are one with God and God works through us and in us by the instigation of the Spirit. Heaven on earth. When we do what is good, it is God working through us and when we love others, we are God to the world.

Amen.

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¹ Heather M. Gorman, “Stone-Campbell Interpretations of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-40): Observations on the Last 50 Years”, *Stone-Campbell Journal* 23 (Spring, 2020), 18.