

**Sermon: Water & The Vine**

New North Church

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

28 April 2024

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

Lately, I've been complaining that the world is a complicated, messed-up place, and I'm tempted to repeat myself today. But in my prayer time while driving to Hingham on Wednesday, it occurred to me that I always end up thanking God for my being born in the right time and place, for bringing us to the community in which we live, and for the call which brought me to New North. Always.

Then I noticed – not for the first time – that in the space between our home and here, it's a beautiful world, despite the maniac squirrels who delight in testing my reflexes as a defensive driver.

Not only are the birds and bees and beasties of every size making the most of the good weather, it's also Town Meeting season. Ordinarily, that means a long evening in the high school gym listening to people argue over the details of an endless list of warrant articles. Then we all vote and go home. Sometimes to get through the town's business, we need more than one night to get it all done.

Every now and then, an issue is so contentious and divisive it splits the crowd, and some find it difficult to control their outrage. Epithets are hurled; invective spewed. It gets ugly fast in the gym and on social media.

All of which makes me wonder, how is it that in such a beautiful world, we can put so much distance between ourselves and our neighbors at the very moment we should be working together? How is it that at times we simply cannot abide each other?

The word *abide* means *to remain* or *continue* or *stay*, which is how Jesus means it when he says *abide in me as I abide in you* in our Gospel reading.

What he's talking about is a mutual in-dwelling between us and him. He uses the imagery of the vine to make a couple of points. First, just as the branches are to remain *on* the vine, his disciples – us – are to remain *in* Jesus. Those who are no longer united to Jesus are cast out to wither. We can think of Judas as a branch that did not bear fruit.

Secondly, all disciples abide on the same vine. In bearing fruit, we show that we are disciples; becoming or being a disciple is the same as being in or remaining in Jesus.

It was John's original thought to describe the vine as the source of life for the branches, using raw material from the Old Testament and Judaism, just as he did in last week's reading about the sheep fold and Jesus being the gate and the model shepherd.

Today, the emphasis is on Jesus as the real vine and not on the Father as the gardener. John mentions the Father only to help qualify the kind of vine that Jesus is – a vine belonging to 'the heavenly order,' as one scholar put it<sup>1</sup>

Here, the role of the Father is to tend the vine, not give it life.

Twice in the Gospel passage, Jesus speaks of himself figurately, using 'I am' statements. Together, they are the seventh and last description of what Jesus is in relation to people. At various points in the Gospel, he says, "I am" – the bread of life; the light of the world; the gate; the model shepherd; the resurrection and the life; the way, the truth, and the life; and now, the real vine.<sup>2</sup>

These are not just titles for Jesus; they are revelations of God's commitment to Jesus' mission, and in John's Gospel, God and Jesus are one. Earlier, in chapter 8, Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM' (8:28).

Last week, we spoke about how the Book of the Acts of the Apostles could just as easily be called the Book of the Acts of the Spirit, and today we can see why – all the action in today's reading is driven by the Holy Spirit.

Philip is guided by and trusts an 'angel of the LORD,' who happens to be the Spirit, who tells him to 'get up and go,' which he does. Then the Spirit tells him to go join a certain chariot, and he does. Later, the Spirit literally seizes Philip and *spirits* him away to Azotus to continue his work. In all of this, Philip obeys without question. Jesus abides in him and he in Jesus. Philip has one job to do, and he does it.

What we have, then, is a conversion story with a few wrinkles in it. The Spirit sent Philip down a desert road in the wilderness. He could have bumped into anyone along the way to whom he could proclaim the good news about Jesus.

But he very specifically came upon a chariot carrying an important Ethiopian court official who happened to be a Jew on his way home from worshipping in Jerusalem.

By the way, ‘the Candace’ is a title, not a name. The Candaces were the queens of the ancient Kingdom of Kush who ruled from the city of Meroe from about 284 BCE to about 314 CE, many of whom ruled independently of a king.<sup>3</sup>

In this story, the court official’s queen let him go to Jerusalem to worship. It’s a long way to travel, risky, and he’s an important guy, too important to lose, but his queen recognized that worship was more important to him than losing her treasury was to her. And now he’s coming home a changed man, a man in whom Jesus abides. Presumably, he will tell of his experiences when he gets home and maybe make more disciples.

One scholar said you could remove this section of the book and not impact the overall story at all. But I think this story tells us a lot about faith. Just as the queen trusted her treasurer to do what he needed to do, so did Philip trust the Spirit to guide him to do what he needed to do. Philip proved himself to be a productive branch on the vine when he grafted on the Ethiopian so he too could abide in Jesus, thus bearing more fruit, and so on and so on.

Something I recently learned about modern day pruning is that I’ve been doing it all wrong. Let’s say you’ve got some basil growing in your garden and you want to include a few leaves in a sauce or a salad. So, you pick some leaves and you’re done. But that would not be good for the plant. Instead, snip an entire stalk, about halfway down, and the plant will respond by growing more stalks and more leaves. The lesson here is that we must understand the plant to get the most out of it.

In the same way, Philip may have been speaking to me when he asked the Ethiopian, ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’

Yes, I would say; when I read the preface, introduction, footnotes, and bibliography, my understanding grows. When I don’t do that, when I try to go it alone, I end up reading the same line over and over, and gain nothing. It’s always best to have a mentor around, someone you can turn to with your questions. It’s even better to have the author reading along with you. Imagine the Ethiopian’s relief when Philip showed up.

Jesus, the Word Incarnate, said, ‘My words abide in you.’ His Word – the *logos* – means his entire teaching, every parable, every explanation. We may not get it at first, but we can’t unhear it; it stays with us. And each time we hear it, we gain understanding.

God has a purpose for each of us to bear good fruit, and any gardener will tell you that even the fruit-bearing branches could use a little pruning every now and then.

We tend to think of bearing fruit to mean doing good works or living a virtuous life, but that imagery came from later Christian theologians.

For John, love and living into the covenant, keeping God's Commandments, are such a part of a faith-filled life that if we do *not* behave in a virtuous manner, then we have no life at all; we may be alive, but we are simply a dead branch on the vine.

Instead, John insisted that 'life is committed life,'<sup>4</sup> meaning that bearing fruit symbolizes growth in life and growth in our union with Jesus, and growth in a love which binds us to Jesus and which spreads life to others.

To be united with Jesus is to be united to our communities, large or small, as all the branches on the vines are together in Christ. And everything follows from that.

Amen.

\* \* \* \* \*

---

<sup>1</sup> Brown, Raymond E., *The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi)* (Anchor Bible 29A; New York: Doubleday 1970), 659.

<sup>2</sup> Brown, Raymond E., *The Gospel According to John (i-xii)* (Anchor Bible 29; New York: Doubleday 1966), 534.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.worldhistory.org/The\\_Candaces\\_of\\_Meroe/](https://www.worldhistory.org/The_Candaces_of_Meroe/)

<sup>4</sup> Brown, Raymond E., *The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi)*, 675.