

Year B, Easter 5

April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2018

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

## **He Went on His Way Rejoicing**

An Ethiopian eunuch on the Wilderness Road that connects Jerusalem with Gaza reads the Jewish scripture as he bounces his way toward home. His feet dangle out the back of the chariot while his driver stands in front steering the horses.

The eunuch, a very bright man, good with numbers, currently serves Queen Candace of Ethiopia as her government's treasurer. Though we suspect he is not Jewish, he has been in Jerusalem to worship at the temple. This man, who will never find fulfillment in children of his own, is searching for a way to make sense of his life.

Probably his physical condition has already exposed him to harassment and rejection making him more receptive to a message that explains why people harass those who are different. Certainly Jews at that time would not have accepted him, for his condition made him imperfect and therefore excluded from their understanding of God's chosen.

Meanwhile on an intersecting trajectory, "an angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.'" So Philip, not knowing why, did as he was told and sees this foreign chariot heading toward him. This time the Spirit aid to Philp, "Go over to this chariot and joint it." The Spirit, that God-infused inner sense of absolute compassion and total non-violence, that non-rivalrous, totally open and wonderfully accepting awareness of all as God's children, requests that Philip; a Jewish follower of Jesus, make connection with a foreigner who is a eunuch.

As Philip approaches he hears the eunuch reading from Isaiah. "Philip asks, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' The man replies, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?'" That's where I come in. One of my roles as pastor is to try

to be a guide for those wrestling to understand the Bible. It is one of my most demanding, difficult and interesting roles.

“Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: ‘Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearers, 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’”

The eunuch had been reading this text hoping to find a clue to his own life. But instead of comfort, solace and direction he finds a scene of mob violence and murder. In bewilderment he asks, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” I suspect he is asking if this is about him. And it very much is. It is about how humans oppress each other, how we find the truth of this in Jesus’ crucifixion and how we discover God’s forgiven when Jesus forgives all of us from the cross.

“Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.” Explanations of the Good News always start by showing us what we humans do. We build our unity with some by excluding others. When we excluded Jesus we excluded God’s Son. We say God has told us to do this but we are mistaken. In fact, in this story God does just the opposite, God tells Philip to go the man who is an outsider in almost every way.

Jesus knew God was entirely different than we think he is and set out to show us in his own life what God was like. He showed us with his stories, his healings, his kindness, and his surprising views. Jesus ate meals with the wrong people, performed miracles on the wrong day, healed foreigners as readily as locals and blessed prostitutes. It was totally upsetting to the way the world worked. It wasn’t long before the religious and political leaders realized the danger Jesus posed. That they didn’t know was that even their response was anticipated and part of the plan.

They arrested him, subjected him to all kinds of humiliation and torture and then they killed him just like Isaiah wrote about many years before. He became yet another victim, joining millions of others before and after him, who died

innocently, having become collateral damage in our futile effort to keep the peace by blaming someone else for what we do not want to face in ourselves.

Then God did something that confounded everyone. God raised the innocent victim, removing him from our power to control through threat of death. God vindicated the victim not the victor. Suddenly it becomes clear that the crucifixion and resurrection had been a divine trick played on us to expose who we are and to confront us with God's subversive compassion. The only way God could break through our barriers is by invading our space through his own son who pronounces God's forgiveness on us while we are in the process of murdering him. I suspect this is the good news Philip proclaimed about Jesus.

This utterly non-violent and forgiving God proclaimed by Jesus is the true vine of John's Gospel. We can draw our energy from this vine that has roots in the source of life rather than rivalry and competition that draws its energy by trying to steal it from others.

"He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit." Maybe pruning involves removing the dead branches of hate and alienation in ourselves, allowing us to be more fruitful? Maybe pruning is a way of prioritizing that we do and letting go of those things that add nothing and take instead. If this is true, pruning is a great blessing.

In the middle of this reading from John there is this strange sentence that to my ear appears out of context. Jesus says, "You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you." He then goes on to say, "Abide in me as I abide in you." We are already cleansed and don't have to worry about that. We don't need to be focused on self-improvement projects for becoming better and better. We are already washed through Jesus' forgiveness. We can just focus on abiding, on staying close, on being one of his followers. It is not about being good. It's about being connected, in relationship, abiding over time, just allowing his energy to flow through us and into the world.

I find this extremely helpful. So much of what we think of as religion is about being good, being pure, trying harder, and trying to be a better person. It can

wear us out and make us neurotic. Forget that; you are already clean by God's doing. Instead focus on "Abiding in me as I abide in you." Just allow yourself to dwell in this incredibly compassionate, forgiving, life supporting, energy enhancing source of strength that comes from sticking with the forgiving victim. Allow what Jesus has said to live in you.

When we do this, we dwell in truth and it changes everything. Even our desires change. Even our addictions, compulsions and impulses change. May we let the "nourishing juiciness" of God's Spirit flow into us and as we become pliable and tender.

After the Ethiopian eunuch had heard the whole story he exclaimed, "Look, here is water! (Another form of life giving "juiciness") What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing." Now connected to a living source for life, this formerly unconnected man went on his way rejoicing. Amen.