

Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 2, 2021

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

GOSPEL READING – John 15:1-8

[Jesus said:] ¹“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

SERMON by Pastor Zach Johnson

The story of the Ethiopian Eunuch is a story of God’s surprising and amazing grace. It is surprising because the Ethiopian does not fit into the “normal” societal standards of today. In Greco-Roman times the term Ethiopian referred to someone who was of African descent. In the first chapter of Acts, Jesus tells the apostles that they will carry the word of God all the way to the ends of the earth. In the Roman empire, communities in Africa were considered to be at the ends of the earth because they lived on the fringes of the Roman empire. So, the first thing we learn from this Ethiopian is that they represent someone who lives at the edge of “normal” society.

Because this Ethiopian is of African descent, they would be considered by today’s society to be a person of color. Usually, today’s society sees people of color as those who live in the lower economic class of society. However, this Ethiopian is someone who has both authority and wealth. This person was of the queen’s court.



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In addition, the Ethiopian is a Eunuch, which means this person has no gender. They are neither male nor female. In today's "normal" society, we expect things to be black and white; we expect someone to be either male or female. But that is not the case here with this Ethiopian.

Finally, with someone like this Ethiopian in today's society, we would expect that person to be most likely anti-religious. Yet, the story tells us that this Ethiopian was on their way back from worshipping at the Jerusalem temple. Plus, the Ethiopian had with them a scroll from the prophet Isaiah. By no means was this Ethiopian "normal" by today's society.

And yet, God's word finds the Ethiopian through the apostle Phillip. Phillip is swept away by the Holy Spirit to the carriage the Ethiopian was riding in. Phillip asks the Ethiopian if they understand the text from the prophet Isaiah. Even though the Ethiopian was a believer in God, they didn't yet know Jesus. So, Phillip interprets the scriptures for this Ethiopian.

Now what is the most amazing thing about this story is that, after Phillip finishes interpreting the scripture for the Ethiopian, the Ethiopian comes to realize Jesus' invitation to become a part of the vine, a vine branch that abides in Jesus. When the Ethiopian sees some water, they immediately ask Phillip if they can be baptized. This baptism ties the Ethiopian into life with Jesus. The Ethiopian was able to recognize that they too were a beloved child of God, and that they were most welcome to abide in Jesus for all eternity.

What this story relates to us is that God's amazing grace shows up in surprising places and surprising people. Like the apostles, we who are baptized in water and the Holy Spirit are called to spread the good news of Jesus to the ends of the earth. We too are called to proclaim the love of Jesus to all people, but especially those who are on the fringes of society, those whom "normal" society has discarded and left behind. We, through baptism in Jesus Christ, are freed and renewed to love all people, but especially those who have been told they aren't welcome in "normal" society because of their gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, or culture.

We are free to love these people on the fringes because of Jesus' love for us. We abide in the vine, the vine that connects us to Jesus. And Jesus is the master gardener who recognizes our potential to bear fruit. No matter how tangled we may get, Jesus' love for us is there to prune



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us so that we indeed produce wonderful fruit. The fruit we produce, filled with Jesus' love, is what becomes our communal wine. It is shared at the table. Since we abide in Jesus and Jesus abides in us, it is true communal wine, which we not only drink to strengthen the relationship between us and Jesus, but it is the wine that we use to invite others to taste and see that the Lord is good. When that happens, our table truly becomes the communion table where all sinners and saints are welcome. Even better news is that the fruit that grows on the vine and becomes the communal wine also brings with it the gift of forgiveness of sins.

I'm sure we've all had those times in our lives where we've felt like we are on the fringes of society. Those times when someone told us that we don't belong; that we are unlovable. Perhaps someone told us that we were ugly in some way, or that due to certain beliefs, we were hated and despised. Maybe we were falsely accused of something which turned others away from us. Perhaps our hearts became so broken that we felt like we would never be loved again.

And yet, in some way, Jesus reminds us that we are indeed loved because we are a beloved child of God. Perhaps Jesus sent us someone like Phillip, who brought us the good news of God's love, and we remembered our baptism. It could've been that time we opened a Bible and the Holy Spirit spoke to us through scripture. Or maybe it was during the singing of a hymn, or a prayer, or coming to the communion table that reminded us of God's love. Whatever it was, it is why we are still here. Jesus has helped us to remember that we are still a part of the vine, that we still produce amazing fruit, and that we have been pruned to share our fruit with others.

But we must also be aware of the fact that there are so many others who are like the Ethiopian who do not yet know that they are loved by God. We have been freed to go out all the way to the ends of the earth, the fringes of society, in order to invite others to the communal table of the holy vine and taste and see that the Lord is good. In doing so, we may just be surprised by how amazing the love and grace of God truly is.

Amen.



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