



# Church of the Isles & Chapel on the Hill

United Churches of Christ

---

*"No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here."*

---

Fifth Sunday of Easter

9:00 AM, May 2, 2021

## GATHERING MUSIC

**Lana Cartner**

## WELCOME & ANNOUNCEMENTS

**Shelly Wilson**

## REPORT FROM THE INTERIM MINISTER SEARCH TEAM

**Mindy Picardo**

## CENTERING MUSIC

**Curtis Watson**

## CALL TO WORSHIP

**Leslie Notaro**

One: The call of God is this:

**ALL: to love God, to love one another.**

One: The invitation of our community is this:

**ALL: to be ambassadors of God's love and grace**

One: We fulfill this mandate best not in word or speech

**ALL: But in compassionate truth and in courageous action.**

One: Come, let us worship together the God who is Love.



## PRAYER OF INVOCATION

Strengthen in us, O God, our love for you today. Lead us into truth, we pray. We offer ourselves in love, care, and hope, today. Amen.

## LEADERS WE HAVE KNOWN

**Hanna Strong & Marty Synnott**

## SPECIAL MUSIC

**Curtis Watson/Lana Cartner**

## PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

**Shelly Wilson**

## THE LORD'S PRAYER

**Curtis Watson**

## SCRIPTURE READING John 15:1-8 Acts 8:26-39

**Alex Fuller**

**John 15** I am the true vine, and God is the gardener. <sup>4</sup>Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. <sup>5</sup>I am the vine; you are the branches.

**Acts 8** <sup>26</sup>Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” <sup>27</sup>So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandace (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, <sup>28</sup>and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. <sup>29</sup>The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

<sup>30</sup>Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

<sup>31</sup>“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.



<sup>32</sup> This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,  
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.

<sup>33</sup> In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth.”

<sup>34</sup> The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” <sup>35</sup> Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

<sup>36</sup> As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?” <sup>37</sup> <sup>38</sup> And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. <sup>39</sup> When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

## SERMON “On Status Quo or Keeping the Church Weird”

**Shelly Wilson** <https://youtu.be/bxeFlopBMTU>

Most humans really dig the status quo or keeping the same old thing the same old thing. Literally, "status quo" means "the existing order of things, present customs, practices, and power relations." But the Christian Scriptures are pretty clear about the truth that Spirit that is restless, dissatisfied, striving, desiring, longing, working, speaking, blowing about in a wind of change. Jesus himself lived a life of change--rooted and grounded in love, described in the Gospel reading for today as a Love like strong, winding vines, with far-reaching branches, a Love originating in a strong tree of Life, that then connects and reconnects and insinuates itself into the status quo like a vine pressing against the walls, and weaving its way in through the windows. That connection of God's love for us and for all the creation is to be mirrored in our love for one another. In the Acts story, we have an example of how that Love changes things--that the Love doesn't just talk and stay in the house with everybody who looks and thinks and loves like we do who reflects our own experience. No, that curling, growing, viny, green and blooming love, bears fruits of joy, peace, justice, compassion, and inclusion—a Love that changes what is happening inside because it goes outside!

In Acts we have this wonderful story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. God says to Philip--get ready and get on the road...it was, says the scripture, a southern route, a desert road, in some translations it says, “it was a road not used anymore!” Spirit sends him out on a rarely used, desert road, not knowing what to expect, sounds like life to me.



But Philip doesn't let that worry him—he just goes. Spirit sends us out on unexpected roads all the time, am I right? I mean, our churches are on such roads right now. It has always been this way for the followers of the Christ, then and now. We're going on our unknown way, and behold, along comes somebody...and though we don't know it, we are connected to them on purpose by Spirit, like a holy vine, holy branches...holy spirit, batman! holy surprise--Philip meets up with an Ethiopian eunuch...

Here is someone of another race, another socio-economic class, respected, wealthy, good job, but religiously, unclean. He is riding in a chariot, in charge of the queen's treasury, literate. Apparently, he owns and is reading, a scroll of Isaiah's prophecy--not your working-class guy on his way home with his lunch pail. Nope, this is royalty riding home in a Mercedes, but he is a eunuch. In case you miss this important detail, the author mentions this fact five times in just three or four verses. Eunuchs were men who had been castrated before puberty for the purpose of working in the courts of female royalty. Eunuchs were banned from entering the temple because they were considered "disfigured" and thus, ritually unclean. There he is, with an important job, wealthy, powerful, learned...but banned from the religious practice, still an outsider, because of his sexual identity. Ummm, sounds pretty status quo, doesn't it?

So, what does the Spirit say when Philip sees this person whose personhood keeps him outside the status quo? Does Spirit say, "Umm, get away from him--he's banned, you know. And banned is how he should stay, status quo...No, Spirit is viny and branchy and connected. and Spirit says--get on over there and stay close to that chariot, " And how does Philip respond? argue? The Scripture says, he "ran over to him..." I imagine Philip like a *Chariots of Fire* moment--running, slow motion over to the chariot, and then Philip says the welcome words, "Do you understand the love you are reading about?" opening the door to the conversation! So, then the eunuch invites him to climb on up in the chariot and to talk to him more...Imagine yourself in this scene! You are on the unknown road, in the wilderness, talking to a man whose experience of life is as different from yours as any human beings could be, who is wanting to know about God and what it all means, and you are supposed to show how the peace of Christ works and how the inclusion of God's invitation looks in real life! How nervous would you be, how hesitant? He is so, well, different! But Philip does just fine--he explains about Isaiah's prophecy and about the story of Jesus and the love and the inclusion that Jesus offered to everyone, and the Ethiopian eunuch gets it all, and believes and the viny, branchy connection works again. The differences melt away in the face of the inclusion of God, and then the weird gets even weirder as the Ethiopian eunuch says, "Here's water, I believe...is there any reason why I cannot be baptized?" Well, according to the status quo there were about a million reasons why--he was a new believer, he was a different race and culture, he was...well, not like everybody else...you know, eunuch, but what did Philip do? He baptized him right then and there, and then, the Spirit, very happy with what Philip had done, and but always at work in the world for more and more connection, whisked him on to the next right thing, while the eunuch went on his way, rejoicing.



There is so much to love about this story, but one of the things is that Philip immediately says Yes to Spirit's call to keep the Jesus community weird. That is always the call—beyond the status quo. The other night I was in a meeting and a sad and a happy thing happened. We were discussing important business and immediately the conversation turned as it does, to the question, "Who can we get to do that?" And a wise and capable leader lifted a hand and said, "I will. I will volunteer. I will head that up." Everyone in the room stared at her in amazement and then broke into relieved laughter said, "you're *volunteering*?" as though that was weird, to say yes to an opportunity, immediately and not after guilt trips or a protracted round of embarrassed silence, looking at the floor, waiting for someone else to take the pressure off. Leaders and members come and go in churches, over time. We age, we move away, and our capacity changes. We will not always be able to (nor should we) say yes, to every opportunity, but when the call comes to step outside the status quo, to offer our own energies, insights, talents, and fresh new ideas, to the community of faith, and we sense the Spirit's call, what if we say yes, send me? What if we head out on a new road, not used, just like Philip did, what if we see the unlikely, the marginal, the extra possibilities, and run toward the chance to keep the church weird, to expand our loving reach beyond the status quo?

When I was young and heard this passage, it was described as "The conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch..." and of course, no one ever mentioned what eunuch meant, and the message we were taught was that we are supposed to go all over, telling everybody about Jesus so they can become just like us, the status quo. But what if this story is about something else.

One of my favorite ministers of all time, Nadia Bolz-Weber, wrote these words about this passage in Acts. She writes, "I've always thought that if the eunuch was reading Isaiah as he returned from Jerusalem having gone there to worship, then I would bet he was also familiar with Deuteronomy 23:1--where it says one whose testicles are cut off shall not be admitted to the assembly of the Lord." (otherwise known as the very best memory verse ever.) This law strictly forbids a eunuch from entering the holy place. His transgression of gender binaries and the inability to fit in proper categories made him profane by nature. He does not fit. But despite the fact that in all likelihood, he would be turned away by the religious establishment, the Ethiopian eunuch sought God anyway. I wonder if, when the Spirit guided Philip to that road in the desert if she guided him to his own conversion. Was it perhaps a mutual conversion? Maybe because they simply asked each other questions in the desert. Look at the text--the only imperatives came from the Spirit. Philip and the eunuch only asked each other questions. The only command came from God and the command was *go and join*. Go and join the other. What we don't know is if the Spirit also gave the eunuch a command to *invite*. Invite this nice Jewish boy--representative of the status quo, of all that clings to the letter of the law and rejects you from God's house. Invite him to sit by you. Go, join, invite, ask questions. Did Philip in his encounter with this gender transgressive foreigner, perhaps learn what seeking the Lord looks like?"



So, as you look to your as yet unknown future, remember that Spirit keeps saying it— don't stay with the status quo... keep the church weird...go, join, invite, ask questions...Amen.

## POSTLUDE

**Lana Cartner**

## BENEDICTION

**Shelly Wilson**

## TRAVELING MUSIC

**Lana Cartner**

### Prayer concerns

- Lucy Berger, recovering from knee replacement surgery
- Jan Kreuger, medical tests
- Larry Kreuger, upcoming knee surgery
- Family and friends of Hanna Strong who died on Wednesday, April 7.
- Marty Synnott, in the death of her sister, Debby, on Tuesday, April 6.
- Shirley Hand, ongoing health concerns
- Guy Hawkins, ongoing health concerns
- Charlotte Hanna, ongoing health concerns
- All those grieving losses caused by gun violence
- Grieving loss of loved ones from COVID, other illnesses, accidents, and racial hatred
- Those living with mental illness, domestic violence, and addiction challenges
- Those who have lost possessions, homes, and hope
- Those exhausted and endangered by systemic violence and racism
- The nations of the world affected by food insecurity, war, and oppression
- The Earth, effects of global climate change.

**The flowers** are placed in the sanctuary today by her family, in loving memory of Hanna Louise Strong. A delicious and robust Coffee Hour after the service is being provided for us by Hanna's family to honor her and to celebrate the ministries she loved so much. **All are invited to stay and enjoy the fellowship and food together!**



**SPECIAL WELCOME** to ALL our visitors, including Hanna's family! We are honored to have you with us!

**MAY OUTREACH OPPORTUNITIES**—from **Outreach Coordinator, Marty Synnott** ([martysynnott@yahoo.com](mailto:martysynnott@yahoo.com); 727-249-3011) In recent conversations with leaders from the Pinellas County Emergency Management and the Pinellas County Faith-Based Community Group I have learned about ways that we, as a church community, can help with disaster/hurricane preparedness. I was impressed with how well- prepared Pinellas County will be when disaster strikes, and we can be a part of this action.

First of all, on **May 20 and 21**, volunteers are needed to assemble hygiene kits and non-perishable foods at the Pinellas County Housing Authority. There are 2 shifts each day: 9-12 and 1-4. This is a huge under-taking and they need all the help they can get. There will be a sign-up sheet following worship for the next three Sundays.

In the meantime, whether or not you can help with the assembling, they *need hygiene items (see the list below) and non-perishable food*. There will be separate containers in the Narthex.

Despite a pandemic, Church of the Isles has continued in our ministry of mission and outreach to those in need. We have never stopped Being Church.

### Some of the items needed for the hygiene kits

- **First Aid kits**
- **Flashlights**
- **Can openers**
- **Sunscreen**
- **Ponchos**
- **Wrapped bars of soap.**
- **Toothbrushes**
- **Shampoo/conditioner**
- **Disinfecting wipes**
- **Duct tape**
- **Whistles**
- **Playing cards**
- **Large Zip-Lock bags**
- **Cards/certificates for services.**

**THE COTI THRIFT STORE needs YOU!** Since our re-opening, our thrift store has seen some significant increases in donations and in business! Our income is up, too! The blessing of being able to fulfill this important ministry is immense! We need additional volunteers, both to work when the store is open AND when the store is closed (sorting



and organizing and shelving donations) Volunteer training is available, and a variety of hours are possible. Please contact Marty Synnott if you can help! Thanks!

**Rod and Elizabeth Snedeker's new address:**

8351 College Parkway, #248  
Fort Myers, FL 33919