

Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
Lutheran Church of the Epiphany ~ Iglesia Luterana de la Epifanía
Hempstead, New York
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Fifth Sunday of Easter B – May 2, 2021
Acts 8:26-40, Psalm 22:25-31, 1 John 4:7-21, John 15:1-8

Christ is risen, Alleluia! C: He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

“You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” were Jesus’ last words to the disciples as he ascended, according to Acts of the Apostles (1:8). And today we see that call carried out by a disciple who probably never knew Jesus as a human being: Philip.

He had been part of the church in Jerusalem; one of the deacons set apart with Stephen, to serve at the congregation’s tables, to make sure that the non-Judean women and children in the congregation received their fair share of food (Acts 6:1-6). This arrangement was to leave the apostles – the original eleven and Thaddeus – to preach and teach, not to be concerned with the daily details of congregational life..

But we meet Philip again in chapter 8 of Acts. He’s in Samaria, having fled Jerusalem, along with the other disciples, to the countryside of Judea and Samaria, except for the leading apostles, when Saul (remember him? That was Paul before Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus [9:1-8]) began to persecute the members of the church in Jerusalem. Jews who he considered to be preaching heresy by following Jesus (8:3).

Once he was in Samaria, Philip preached the good news and people believed (8:4-8). Remember, these are the hated Samaritans who were considered by Judeans to be like dogs for their departure from traditional Judaism. But the believed!

We next meet Philip as he’s told by a messenger of the Lord to “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (8:26.) He does that and meets the Ethiopian eunuch in his chariot on this desert road, reading a scroll of Isaiah’s prophecy.

He was a black man (*Ethiopian* meant “burnt face” in Greek) (www.workingpreacher.com - Matt Skinner, Commentary on Acts 8:26-40, May 2, 2021) and he was recognizable a eunuch by virtue of his lack of adult male secondary sex characteristics (beard, musculature, etc.). According to the law about admission of castrated men into the assembly to worship, Deuteronomy 23:1, he wouldn’t have been allowed into the Jerusalem temple to worship because of his condition.

However, our text tells us that he had come to Jerusalem to worship and now he was headed home. So it appears that he had been able to worship. Was he a Jew? Was he a “God-fearer,” a Gentile who believed in YHWH? It could have been either, because, after the first destruction of the temple in 586 BC, there was a settlement of Judeans who had fled from Jerusalem to Egypt and on to Ethiopia. They had intermarried with the residents and maintained their worship practices for the next six hundred years. So there were black Jews. (www.workingpreacher.com - Sermon Brainwave, May 2, 2021.)

Following Jewish practices, Philip probably shouldn't even have spoken to the man, but God's Spirit told him, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” (8:29.) So that's what Philip did, and the Ethiopian eunuch became, not just a Jew or God-fearer, but also a follower of Jesus.

After hearing from Philip what a portion of Isaiah's “servant song” about the silent lamb going to slaughter told about Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, recently crucified, resurrected and ascended. And there, in the middle of this desert road, there appeared a body of water deep enough for Philip to immerse and baptize the Ethiopian. And the witness to Jesus would now be going to Ethiopia – which, in those days, was “the ends of the earth.”

This Spirit-directed testimony and extension of the realm of God in Christ was an example of the activity for which Jesus had prepared the disciples, as we heard in the gospel text for today. John describes Jesus giving his so-called “farewell address” to the disciples on the night they shared their last meal together, after Jesus had washed their feet to demonstrate servant leadership.

We hear in this portion of the address about the relationship between Jesus, God the Father and believers. We continue to receive Jesus' love and power through our relationship to him: like that of a branch attached to the true vine (John 8:1-5). His address using the metaphor of God the Father, the vinegrower, the vine and the branches, describes how the latter are cut off when they don't produce grapes, and how they are pruned (sometimes severely) even when they do, to prod them to produce even more abundantly. When the branches are pruned, they grow more, as well.

They reach new places, as Philip reached new places in Samaria and on the desert road that would lead, eventually, to Ethiopia, with the life-giving and saving message of the gospel.

So how are **we** called to be growing branches, empowered and sustained, loved by Jesus, with the mission to testify to that power and love, even to the ends of the earth?

Yes, to be faithful in our discipleship practices: regular worship, daily prayer and scripture reading, support of God's ministry on earth, the church, through our time and wealth, and service to people in need, those who are mistreated or abused by the world.

How have we adapted this call to our lives during the pandemic? Yes, we've moved to electronic worship, scripture study, congregational prayer and meetings. In fact, this has added our contact with some people in the community who considered themselves homebound and not able to attend worship. But we've also lost touch with some people who won't or can't worship electronically. We've added electronic giving since we haven't been able to "pass the plate." We've adapted our seasonal support of Lutheran Social Services projects so that we can do it without having physical contact. We have maintained our properties to continue as faithful stewards of what God has provided for us until we are able to return in person.

Have we spoken to others in our circles about Jesus? Have we invited them to join us in worship or scripture study? Have those of us who haven't been financially impacted by the pandemic increased our financial support of the churches' ministries to make up the difference for those who've not had the same income as before? Have we increased our support of the LSS food bank and other emergency services to help people who are out of work to feed their families?

What quality and amount of fruit are we producing for God's realm on earth? How is Christ's love and power flowing from the vine through us, the branches? Are we producing more and better fruit because we abide in Jesus and God the Father? Or are we failing to abide in Jesus and his word, thereby cutting ourselves off from the sustaining vine and just throwing ourselves away like withering branches?

Let's pray: Sustaining, empowering Jesus, lover of our souls and encourager of our ministries, energize us to bear the fruit that grows from the life of your vine. Send your Spirit to inspire each of us to serve with more love every day; to proclaim that love in new and creative ways in faithfulness to you. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. C: Amen