

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, May 10, 2009.

Easter 5 Year B

In this morning's Gospel from John, Jesus uses the image of a vine and its branches to describe the relationship between himself and his disciples. "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit." This image of a vine sending forth its shoots has inspired centuries of Christians to go forth and bear the fruit of God's love. At times the Church has been a lush grapevine, nourishing and inspiring the world with its worship and wisdom. At other times the Church has been more like an invasive kudzu, nearly choking the world with its arrogance and hypocrisy. If Jesus Christ is the vine and we, his disciples, are the branches, how are we to be a church that shares the Gospel in our own time? How are we called to continue bearing fruit?

In this morning's story from Acts, we meet one of the early Christian evangelists, Philip, also known as Philip the deacon. Philip, for whom our sister Episcopal parish, St. Philip's, is named. Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch is one of the model stories for spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. An angel of the Lord tells Philip to follow a back road, a road through the wilderness. There he comes upon an Ethiopian eunuch, an official in the court of the Ethiopian Queen. We are told that this man has been worshiping in Jerusalem. He is a foreigner, but he is a religious pilgrim in the land of the Jews. He obviously believes in their God and is devoted enough to make this long and dangerous journey. In the minds of the Biblical writers, Ethiopia was not just a place on the map. It represented the end of the map, the farthest reach of the known world. This Ethiopian is a long way from home. The Spirit instructs Philip to go and join the man's chariot. He finds the man reading from the Prophet Isaiah, and Philip interprets the scriptures to him. Here we have a perfect picture of Christian evangelism. An foreigner unfamiliar with Jesus meets a zealous follower of Christ on a wilderness road and the foreigner receives the Gospel.

As we reflect on this picture of evangelism, this image of sharing the good news, we might imagine that Philip is an example for us. He is sent by the Holy Spirit. He is the one who is able to interpret scripture in light of Jesus Christ. He is the one who baptizes the newly converted Ethiopian. I think we probably would do well to see Philip as a model. It would be something for more of us to approach a stranger and engage them in a conversation about scripture. How many of us would have the boldness to ask someone "Do you understand what you are reading?" While some of us could use a little more boldness, some evangelists have had no problem whatsoever approaching people different from them and asking, "Do you understand what you are reading?" In some cases the approach was more like, "Let me give you something to read and then let me tell you exactly what it means. And then let me tell you what you have to do. And if you disagree or try to do something different, then let me tell you how God will punish you." This image of evangelism is why some of us are uncomfortable with thinking of ourselves as evangelists. We do not want to be lumped in with those who force faith on others, who act like invasive and choking branches of the Christian vine. We want to share the Gospel, but we are aware that many have shared the Gospel in hurtful ways. We are aware that many of our friends and neighbors want nothing to do with church precisely because they have been wounded or insulted or just bored by Christians who were trying to explain the good news. How do we share the Gospel with these friends and neighbors? How do we bear the fruit of Christ's love in a world that has been injured by some of Christ's followers?

I wonder if it might be helpful, as we reflect on Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch to see ourselves in

the role of the Ethiopian? Instead of automatically assuming that we, like Philip, have good news to impart, what if we, like the Ethiopian, place ourselves in the position of receiving good news? Instead of opening the conversation, like Philip, with the question, "Do you understand what you are reading?" we, like the Ethiopian, begin with the question, "How can I understand, unless someone guides me?" How can I understand unless someone guides me? The wonderful thing about this man is his receptivity. He is a faithful pilgrim on a sacred journey. He is searching the scriptures for meaning. He is hungry for someone to lead him toward a deeper appreciation of what God is saying. And clearly, God has heard his prayers, because the Holy Spirit sends Philip to him. The Holy Spirit makes a way in his wilderness.

As we seek to be branches of the vine, as we strive to spread the good news of Jesus Christ and bear the fruit of God's love, perhaps we might learn something from this unnamed Ethiopian. "How can I understand, unless someone guides me?" he asks. How can we understand the good news of Jesus unless we invite another to be our guide, unless we ask another to help us see how they see and know how they know? We will have our own interpretations, our own opinions that we want to share. But we will miss something crucial if we assume we have all the answers.

Before I went to seminary I worked for a non-profit organization teaching youth and children about how to deal with conflict. I went into schools and led workshops and groups for the kids who got into fights. When I started the work, I would go in with my lessons and I would lead the kids through the activities about how to use words instead of fists to resolve their differences. Oftentimes the kids would be resistant to my teaching. "That will never work," they would tell me. And my response would involve an example of how it could work if they would only try what I was telling them. Eventually, I realized that I was not getting through to many of these kids. I was a stranger in their world. I had little in common with them. I was as foreign as an Ethiopian eunuch would have been. It took a while for me to realize that what I needed to do to reach them was not to tell them how to change but to invite them to teach me. "How can I understand, unless someone guides me?" Instead of beginning with me telling them what to do, I began by asking, "how do you deal with conflict?" "Why does violence seem to work for you?" "What's hard about using words instead of fists?" I cannot say that this approach miraculously turned my troublesome teens into peace-loving pacifists. What did happen was that I saw the good news I wanted to share in an entirely different light. I understood that making peace is more complicated than I had originally thought. My view of the world had been expanded and my willingness to let these young people teach me made them a little more open too.

As Christians, we have good news to share. Christ is risen, Alleluia. Jesus Christ is the bridge between God's love and our human existence. Christ is the vine, we are the branches, and with God's help we bear much fruit, fruit that can heal a wounded world. Good news. We may understand this good news more richly when we invite others to guide us. We may be able to interpret this Gospel more deeply when we become the foreigner, when we become the pilgrim, when we go to unfamiliar places and invite someone there to share their wisdom and experience. These places and people may be around the world, they may be just down the street. We may be more able to share and be evangelists in places that are tired of evangelism when we can open our Bibles, point to the words, and say, "How can I understand unless I hear what you think?" If our hearts and minds are open, if we are ready to receive them, the Holy Spirit will send us guides. And many of them won't even know what they're doing. But they will guide us, and we might even guide them. By God's grace, we may hear and proclaim the good news and bear the abundant fruit of God's love.