

“Emerging Spirit”
Acts 8:26-40 John 15:1-8
Fifth Sunday after Easter, Year B, May 2, 2021
First Presbyterian Church, Sandpoint, Idaho
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The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is a fun read, with lots of details, and subtleties interwoven, as we see the Spirit of the Lord at work. A eunuch is a man whose been castrated, so he’s not a physical threat to the royal line. Because he’s been physically humbled, this eunuch serves in a specific way: appointed to a high position as the Queen of Ethiopia’s treasurer. People in power invest a lot of trust in this man. You can tell he’s powerful because he’s “seated in his chariot,” and “he was reading.” He’s not driving the chariot, but is a passenger, and he’s educated. Important people were passengers, everyone else walked. Important people had privilege, and access to learning. Notice that Philip “runs up” to the chariot. He’s shown respect by the invitation to come aboard, and to sit next to this man, is very prestigious.

Yet with all this power and prestige, the unique social role he played, and his ability to come to Jerusalem to worship, this Ethiopian eunuch was also excluded from full participation in the covenant community. He’s a foreigner, and he’s a eunuch. Jewish law in Deuteronomy 23:1 forbid people in his category from full participation. What this did was protect the patriarchal

structure, and it reinforced the misguided belief that only in-tact men had the power of life within them. As the chariot comes to some water, this powerful man who has lived an exclusive life, yet also excluded, commands the chariot to stop. This is perhaps a symbolic action in itself. He's ready for exclusion to stop. He's ready for social constraints and religious rules based on exclusion to stop.

He questions Philip, knowing full well the restrictions he's dealt with in his life, and now asks, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Their actions speak louder than words.

In the chariot, he's been reading Isaiah. This foreigner who is a eunuch is reading the prophet, who, just three chapters after the passage he asks Philip about, shares a divine oracle that promises universal salvation soon to come: which involves inclusion for eunuchs and foreigners (and he's both). Inclusion to the covenant community comes in the messianic age. And here's Philip talking about Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, who saves the world. That this man can be baptized is a proclamation. This declares Christ as the Messiah. This declares the end of exclusion based on external qualifications or distinctions. This declares inclusive, unconditional love, shown in the waters

of baptism's rebirth as we die and rise with Christ and the Holy Spirit empowers us to live as new creations.

Aren't you glad that outdated doctrines didn't limit the power of Jesus to change this man's life? He "went on his way rejoicing." His life now reveals unity with Christ, the love of God, faith and devotion as he follows Jesus. Externally, his situation and physical condition are exactly the same as they were. Internally, he's transformed.

In John chapter 15 we read as Jesus says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower." We hear of pruning, like we see those old doctrines fall away, even the ones that bear fruit are trimmed so they can bear more fruit. And we hear about "abiding" as Jesus invites us to abide in him as he abides in us.

Suzanne Guthrie picks up on this imagery of the garden, the orchard, and she shares a reflection, saying, "When I was about eleven years old I developed a passion for the work of Luther Burbank after I'd read about his gardens in my mother's old Book of Knowledge. I learned that you can graft a desirable trait from the branch of a particular fruit or flower, onto another plant with stronger roots and stock. You can grow a tree with many different kinds of blossoms or fruits on it. I came to love gardens and for most of my life I've

been a flower gardener. You have to be ruthless to garden successfully. Out go the weaker plants and weeds, divide the thriving ones before they crowd everything else out, deadhead daily, hunt for and destroy slugs in the buggy evening and again early morning, and prune prune prune down to the nub. Don't worry about disturbing those root systems in the seedling packets: tearing, breaking, chopping stimulates them. Good Soulwork lessons.”

(Suzanne Guthrie, At the Edge of the Enclosure,

<http://edgeofenclosure.org/easter5b.html>).

Soulwork lessons! Grafting, tearing, breaking, chopping, and prune, prune, prune: these stimulate growth. Are we ready for that? Do we really want that kind of spiritual learning? We like the growth part, the abundant fruit, but when the stalk is trimmed back to what looks like a barren nub, it doesn't look very glamorous, and it doesn't feel very good. Soulwork, like plants in the springtime, is a process of growth, sometimes a painful process. Yet sometimes it's the long, slow growth and training that comes with a cost that has the most to teach, develops the deepest compassion, and blossoms with authentic love and care that would not have been touched upon in any other way.

One of the things I like about this passage in John is that there's no waste. Like a permaculture garden, everything is repurposed as part of regenerative agriculture. God, the vinegrower, even does pruning, both for branches that produce fruit in order to make more, and to take branches that have broken away from the vine. These are withering and "such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." In gardening, ash is helpful for soils. It lowers pH acidity and provides nutrients that help garden vegetables grow well. What on one hand sounds like destruction is on the other hand beneficial. The gardener, the vinegrower, knows what needs to be done and how to do this.

One of the features the vine and branches depend on is unity. The branches cannot survive, let alone thrive, without staying connected to the vine. The vine is where the roots are linked. Water, minerals, vitamins; these all come through the roots, drawn out of the soil. They travel up the vine, like the trunk of a tree. The branches connect to the vine. But, even more, the branches emanate from the vine, and give expression to the vine. The vine depends on the branches. Branches are where the leaves are, those green photosynthesis energy providers that also feed the entire plant. On the inside,

the roots are sharing, on the outside the leaves are sharing. This is a mutual sharing, an exchange, a covenant relationship that gives of itself to the other.

Branches are where the fruits develop as this united energy finds fulfillment and the ability to feed others. This collection of sugars and liquids and carbohydrates is also a carrier of genetics in the form of seed. As the fruit is plucked or falls, the seed is spread and the vine can reach beyond the length of its branches. The vine depends on the branches, and the branches on the vine.

What an amazing image of being rooted in God, our Source and Origin, of finding strength in Christ, who is the vine, and living as expressions of Christ sent with joy on our way.

As we get more and more into this spring season of gardening, as the Community Peace Garden here at the church in Sandpoint matures with blueberry bushes, pear trees, and veggies growing in boxes, may we continue to learn lessons about God's covenant relationship; gifts of unconditional love, unity as God blesses the world, and the ongoing ministry of Jesus through us. May we learn in our role, as branches on this vine of community, called and sent into the world to share joy, compassion, and love, even as we are continually trained in authentic ways. May God transform our suffering, help

us release that which constricts or confines or limits full participation in the glories of God, and help us celebrate the humble, vulnerable love of Christ, Jesus, our Lord. Amen.