

April 29, 2018 Fifth Sunday of Easter
Pastor Carolyn Albert Donovan
Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

GOSPEL

John 15:1-8

The holy gospel according to Saint John, the fifteenth chapter.
Glory to you, O Lord.

[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.”

The gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

Today Jesus says that he is the vine to which we are all connected as branches...Today we remember that without Jesus we have no life...and with him, we have life in abundance...and today we remember that all our life is connected to one another...and every child of earth.

Now it was quite some time after Jesus said these words recorded in John's gospel that the events we heard from the book of Acts occurred...and it's been even longer still to this moment...but both the story of Philip and the Ethiopian whose name we do not know...and the experiences of our own lives...probably offer us ample evidence that we haven't yet learned how to live as if Jesus words are true...as if our lives are all bound up with one another and with God.

The story in Acts today is an amazing one...even more so as we walk the landscape in which it occurred...around that wider scene surrounding that wilderness road leading away from the temple in Jerusalem where Philip and the Ethiopian whose name we do not know meet one another.

Today we have the chance to consider what may be one of the most important conversion stories in Scripture...maybe even in history. So let's travel back to that road for a spell.

There is a person coming from Jerusalem, and returning home to Ethiopia. As I have said, the name of this person not recorded. Some traditions offer the name Simeon. More recently, I have heard the name Dawit suggested...which is an Ethiopian name that means "Beloved" ...and is related to the name David.

(Rev. Heidi Neumark suggests this choice.)

This person is a eunuch...one of a number of people who were were selected at an early age and castrated. This was so they could be kept as servants of the Ethiopian queen, called the Candace, without being perceived as a sexual or genealogical threat.

You may have noticed the efforts of syntax I have gone through thus far to avoid referring to this person as a man or to use the pronoun "him," though it does appear in the text. But...Dawit would not have been considered a man. Not really. Without their consent, their gender identity was altered. They were cast out from the manhood they otherwise would have been able to claim. Their capacity to create life and to experience desire was taken from them. So I will not refer to Dawit today as "he." "He" is a word and an identity that Dawit might have claimed...but because of a choice they did not get to make, they couldn't.

While the privilege of their birth sex was stolen from them, it is very likely that Dawit was one who could rightfully claim a different treasured identity, though, which was that of a Jewish heritage. Without knowing a few obscure

bits of history this isn't at all evident, though. Were there Jewish people in Ethiopia? Well...there is a historical tradition that, going back to the time of Solomon, there have been people of Jewish descent in what was then called Ethiopia (actually...not quite the same place as Ethiopia now...just to make things a little more complicated). That group of people descended from a relationship Solomon is thought to have had with the Queen of Sheba...who is considered one in the line of the candaces. It is very possible that Dawit was coming to the land of their ancestors...not as a *convert* to Judaism...but one *born* into the people of God. In this way, it is not all that odd or surprising that they were going to worship in Jerusalem.

But when Dawit came to the temple, they would not have been permitted to enter. Eunuchs were prevented from entering. And, Dawit's status as one forbidden from the temple would have been apparent to many, even without any kind of invasive inspection...because Dawit's body would have developed so differently than their peers without the effects of hormonal changes later in their life. Dawit's physical difference was not just a private or hidden one, it was public...known...and judged...as outside the order of those allowed into the temple by the laws of Leviticus.

Imagine then, what Dawit might have been feeling, riding away from a 1,500 mile pilgrimage...a pilgrimage left uncompleted because of barriers that only existed because of something done to their body without consent or choice. They may have been reading Isaiah with such grief in their heart on that wilderness road, especially the part that speaks of eunuchs being admitted to the temple (56:3-5), which was apparently not taken so much as law but symbolism or prophecy in those days. A faint flame hope that there was a place in God's house for them would have been snuffed out.

(For much of this historical background, I reference the work of Cory Pechan Driver, which can be found here: <https://corydriver.com/2018/04/23/resurrection-5-the-expanding-kingdom-bearing-much-fruit/>)

And then Philip is sent to them along the road. Philip hears them reading aloud from a few chapters earlier in Isaiah, "In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants?"

“How fitting,” Dawit might have been thinking. “There was no justice in the temple for me...and no one will ever speak of my descendants...I will have none.” And, Dawit asks Philip, “Is the prophet talking about himself or someone else?” And I wonder if what he meant was, “Is the prophet talking about me? Is there any room in God’s story for me? Because I’m having trouble finding it.” Whether or not Philip perceived anything beneath the question, he proceeds to show how Jesus is one who was deprived of justice and descendants...and who entered the places of shame and death to reclaim all who are rejected and excluded for the kin-dom of God. Whether he meant to or not...Philip showed Dawit how Jesus was like them...how God had chosen to live in a rejected body, too. Philip showed Dawit even more than a place in the story where they could belong. Philip showed Dawit a place in the very being of Christ.

I can’t imagine what this news might have felt like. To have so recently stood before literal walls that separated you from God...to be turned away...only to be told by this stranger on the road, that God was never on the other side of the wall...that God was excluded, too...that God was where they were...was one of them...

In the joy of this news, Dawit sees a pool of dirty ditchwater along the road...remembering the great and beautiful baptismal purifying pools outside the temple, to which their way had been blocked. And they say to Philip, “Here is water. What is to prevent me from being baptized?”

And Philip, frankly, could have given Dawit a list.

“So many things could prevent you...ummm...The rules of the temple and scriptures just to start; the water isn’t the right kind of water; it’s not in the right place; I don’t have the authority to perform baptism or ritual purification; even if you could be purified, how do I know if you’re really ready or truly understand?”

But somehow Philip realizes that he can say none of these things, because Dawit has read the prophet more clearly than so many leaders of the faith. Dawit has heard the gospel even beyond what Philip may have known himself

to be speaking. This is the moment of conversion. This is when the world tilts on its axis. This is when everything is transformed in an instant and you see the world for what it really has been all along. There is no denying it. I just don't think the convert is who we might think it is. Because just as much as Dawit is converted...Philip is, even more. In that moment, Philip sees that God has placed nothing in the path of this Beloved one. They belong to God, no matter what barriers humans have placed in the way...no matter what else has been stolen from them, this is one thing that cannot be taken away. And, all of a sudden, it is crystal clear that a pool of dirty ditchwater can be a baptismal font more grand than in any temple court.

Nothing is to prevent you. Nothing at all. Not the labels you've been given, not the walls you are placed outside, not the shape of your body, not your gender, not your heritage, not one thing in heaven or on earth stands between you and the God who loves you.

And they went on their way rejoicing. And so may we.

Friends, does anything stand between you and your God?

Friends, does anything stand between God and any of God's beloved ones?

Friends, might we live as if this is true?

So be it. Thanks be to God. Amen.