

Easter 5B 2021 The Vine Needs the Branches St. Luke's Anchorage Rev. Anne Harris

Acts 8: 26-40, Psalm 22: 24-30, 1 John 4: 7-21, John 15: 1-8

We heard two explosive accounts from scripture this morning.

In the first reading we heard the account of Philip's baptism of the Ethiopian. This is a mind blowing piece of scripture that shows us the workings of the Holy Spirit. We say offhand things like "The Spirit blows where it wills" and pretend that we agree with this strategy, but I don't think we realize just how radical the Holy Spirit is. I don't think we realize that the Holy Spirit doesn't care about how things have always been done. The Holy Spirit wants to make all things new. When you think about it, that's a pretty dangerous strategy.

One of the key verses in this scripture we heard today is when the Eunuch says, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

Well actually, there were two massive stumbling blocks in the way for the Eunuch, according to the way things had always been done. But Philip, led by the Holy Spirit, who pays no attention to the way things have always been done, recklessly went ahead and baptized him anyway, bringing into the faith someone who was simultaneously **outside** the law (because he was not Jewish) and **condemned by** the law (because he was a eunuch. For proof of this read Deuteronomy 23:1 when you get home. If you look it up now you might be so shocked that you stop listening to this sermon!)

What better proof do we have that Jesus accepts outsiders and those condemned by the law as full members of the family of God than this scripture? The Eunuch, who had no choice in his sexual status, was one of the first gentiles to be baptized. So that is mind blowing. And I hope you can see the application for us today. When someone wants to become a part of the family of God, there should be

nothing preventing them from doing so. And more importantly, there is no one who is so outside the love of God that we should not invite them to St Luke's and welcome them with open arms and hearts.

But one of my favorite pieces of explosive scripture is the vine and branches metaphor that we also heard this morning in our Gospel reading. I love this piece of scripture. My father was a gardener and I love all things botanical because of his influence.

"I am the vine, you are the branches." What a perfect metaphor this is for the church! But there is more to it than meets the eye.

Jesus says he is the vine, that is, the root stock, the part of the vine that gives the mature plant its identity and that supplies nutrients and moisture to the growing plant. The vine's roots anchor the plant firmly and run deep into the well of salvation, sending that living water to the branches and leaves, helping them to produce flowers, and in good time, fruit.

Jesus is the vine and in this metaphor, we the church, are the branches, supported by Jesus, held up to the light, and receiving nutrients through Him. Without him we will wither and die.

You see how obviously essential the role of the **vine** is. But according to this scripture, we the branches are just as absolutely essential for the vine! Without us the vine cannot do what the plant is supposed to do, which is to bear good fruit. In this illustration, God needs us as much as we need God! The vine and the branches are codependent, or symbiotic. They work together to bring about God's will on earth. Jesus needs us, and we need him.

We might have passed quickly over this astonishing fact in the past due to the familiarity of this metaphor to us. But it is much too radical to pass over with a careless "ho-hum"! So I'll say it again, **God needs us to fulfill God's mission!**

Now you might be saying to yourself, that in our classical theology we believe that God can manage God's own creation perfectly well without us, so what does this vine and branches metaphor really say? What this metaphor tells us is that God, the creator of the universe, has **chosen** to work through us!

Now, I'm honestly not sure that was a good choice for God to make. We are not very reliable, are we? We get drawn off-kilter by whatever voice we hear that is yelling the loudest. We are filled with self-interest, doubt, and fear of the "other". We might have good intentions, but we soon lose focus.

However, I am sure that, in the end, God will work everything out because God is infinitely kind, and infinitely patient.

The metaphor tells us that to get the spiritual nourishment and support that is needed for God's work in the world we need to be joined with Jesus Christ, actually growing out of his own body. We do this by remaining in constant contact with Jesus Christ through prayer, worship, bible study, and acts of mercy. If we stay connected to the vine we can then participate in the necessary work of reconciliation, of healing, and teaching that will transform the world into all that God means it to be.

We are the ones who bear the fruit that is the outward sign of God's grace actively working in the world.

What does Jesus mean when he says we are to bear good fruit?

The fruits of the Spirit are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. So I am going to say that anything you do in your life that is inspired by any one of these fruits, or that produces these fruits, is good fruit.

On a concrete level, all the "good works" that we do as individuals and as a church are examples of the good fruit that we produce, as long as they are accompanied love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Another example of the fruit that we bear is the children that we raise in a congregation. We must always nurture and love our children and young adults. We must always encourage them to share their gifts and ministries with us and among us. We want young people to feel loved and needed. Our young people are baptized members, and therefore full, contributing members of our congregation.

The children in a congregation represent us in the wider community too. They show the world our fruit. They grow in the faith as they are nourished by Jesus Christ the vine, and taught by those of us who carry on the faith and pass it down the generations.

So it is important for everyone, young and old to stay connected to the vine, because without that connection you will wither, and you will fail to produce good fruit.

In staying connected to Jesus we receive the continual strengthening of the Holy Spirit. In the New Testament reading for this morning we heard “By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, **because he has given us of his spirit.**”

And he has given us his Spirit. He has given us his Spirit to overflow in our lives, and to be poured out for others around us. Vines do not eat their own fruit – it is for others. Therefore pray for more of God’s Spirit in your lives, and for more fruit to share with others. Pray for a revival of hope and love and joy! Pray for all things to be made new. We need it, Anchorage needs it, our nation needs it, the whole world needs it, and the Holy Spirit longs to give it so that we can assist God in making all things new.

Amen