

Abide in me as I abide in you. I am the vine, he says, you are the branches. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you | unless you abide in me... My father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Jesus is speaking to the disciples. They are in the upper room celebrating the passover the night Jesus is arrested. Jesus has washed their feet and given them the new commandment - "that you love one another... By this everyone will know that you are my disciples," he says. "You are the branches," he is now telling them, "I am the vine - the place you start, your home; I am the place from which you draw nourishment, new life, and energy to grow. Abide in me, bear fruit, become my disciples, love one another."

We number among these disciples of course, and this is a rich image Jesus gives to us here for learning this relationship. But I'd like to spend time looking at one of the branches Jesus was addressing that night.

Now long after the resurrection, an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go down that wilderness road.” So Philip got up and went. On that road, he meets a Eunuch from Ethiopia (North Africa). He is a court official of the queen in Ethiopia, and he’s returning home from Jerusalem.

You may already know what a eunuch is but I think we need to be clear - this man had (at some point) been castrated. A margin note in my bible says that “it was common in biblical times for officials in royal courts to be *physically altered* so they could not father children.”

In terms of consequences, being unable to father children in that time and place is one thing. But in a society structured around religious law (much of which had to do with maintaining strict gender boundaries) and military occupation (a hyper masculin enterprise if ever there was one) means that Eunuchs had a problem. And the gospel writer doesn’t allow us to miss this fact.

Do you remember way back to the third Sunday of Lent? What am I saying? Of course you do! I described as part of that sermon the architectural layout of the Temple complex in Jerusalem. Remember with me.

A huge open space inside the outer walls that functioned as the temple marketplace. In the middle of that open space, a walled off area with the Temple standing high inside it, looming above the whole complex. The entrance to this walled off section at the furthest end from the Temple gets you into the “Court of the Women” - it was as close to the Temple as women were permitted. Up some stairs from there and through a portico was the Court of Israel, where Jewish men were permitted. Unless you were a priest, an office only held by men - the keepers and defenders of the Holy of Holies - you could go no further, be no closer to the Temple. So tell me, in which court did the Eunuch worship?

Chances are good that the Eunuch could get no closer to the Temple than the outer marketplace. Packed with people buying and selling, the noises and smells of animals, money changing hands, laughing and haggling, yelling, Roman soldiers patrolling... This might\* have been where the Eunuch, escaping notice, could have worshipped. This proximity to the Temple might\* have been enough for him. But what if it wasn't. John tells us that he had come to Jerusalem to worship but was returning home.

This Eunuch, however close he could get to the Mercy Seat (God's throne on Earth) he was a man of faith, a student of scripture, trying to learn and understand God and perhaps his own place in the world. He is reading Isaiah when Philip comes upon him. Sent to this wilderness, sent to this Eunuch, Philip asks him "Do you understand what you are reading?" The Eunuch tells him, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" Invited by the Eunuch into his chariot, Philip proclaims to him the good news of Jesus.

Let me pause right there for a moment. Where do you see yourself in this story? Have you ever sidled up next to someone and proclaimed to them the good news of Jesus? Have you ever interrupted the wilderness-road bible study of someone new to the story?

Or have you ever been afraid of being recognized for something different about you? Fearful enough to not dare enter a house of worship? Have you ever felt alone in your circumstances, wondering what it all means? Have you turned to the scriptures at times for answers and had questions but no one to ask them?

Have you ever met a Philip? Someone who brought you into some understanding? Someone who showed you acceptance, the love of God, your very belovedness? Who was it that shared the good news of Jesus with you? Did they tell you about him? Did they give you an experience of him?

By now you might have come to see what we're partly talking about this morning: "Eunuch" is a first century label for a sexual minority. If you've ever heard of the LGBTQ community (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer or Questioning), these are modern day Eunuchs - people marked by society, labeled different, "ab-normal," told that they don't belong. Being excluded from "real" Temple worship, perhaps even turned away by Temple officials (even as a court official of the Queen of Ethiopia) that wilderness road seems to come a little more into focus. Indeed, it is a road all too familiar for those who are deemed unacceptable and unwelcome in places of worship.

Human sexuality is a very young field of study (less than 200 years old) and many of the terms used to demarcate various groups are younger still. So considering the Ethiopian Eunuch this way requires some care, but doing so helps us see our present day with a little clarity.

Putting questions of morality and sinfulness aside for today, **I'm far more concerned with where in society such people find welcome?** Where do you find welcome, dear ones? Do you find it here, at Messiah? I will tell you that I have found it here - a deep, warm, expansive welcome. You are a community that holds **Welcome** central to who you are. The plans for our new building are all about welcome. We understand that the welcome we extend here, is a reflection of the welcome Jesus gives to us - in this sanctuary, to those waters, at this table. So I ask you, is our welcome conditional? Are people of different sexual orientations welcome here?

I don't yet know that answer. I am just beginning to know most of you after a year under Covid19. I do know that for you, the bible speaks, and that today we hear this: Bear fruit. Become my disciples. Love one another.

Jesus is the vine of which we are branches. As we abide in Christ, in our connection to this life giving vine, so God in Christ abides in us, and through us bears fruit. But what does that mean? What is this fruit?

Our reading from 1 John echoes a subtle but startling word in our gospel lesson. From the letter: "If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." And from the gospel; "My father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." Love perfected, becoming disciples - these scriptures (put side by side today) speak of process, of growth, of change. What Jesus did on the cross, in his death and in his rising, began something that is not yet finished or completed - it is only beginning. The seeds planted in Christ sprout but must change and grow to bear fruit.

In this Season of Easter, Jesus is reminding us of our branch-ness. He tells us that the more deeply we abide in Christ, the farther our branches will reach and the greater the yield of fruit. Abiding in Christ (resting, dwelling in Christ) this is the key that opens us, unfurls us out into the world. Abiding in Christ opens our ways of reading certain scripture verses that might put conditions on the welcome he extends to and through us. Abiding in Christ by his very invitation shows us the love he bears for the world and the welcome he extends to all. And the fruit is just what follows.

What is just beginning today is a conversation I'd like to have with you, beloved. As your pastor, I seek to be attuned not only to the call of God to me, but the call of God to you and us as a community. Philip's proclamation, the Eunuch's question, what I have learned of you and what I am learning of Red Lodge - these press the question. There is a need in Red Lodge and a need in the world for wilderness roads that lead to water. Will we be water in a parched land, Messiah? What will our answer be to the question, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

You may not hear a sermon about this for some time, but I will bring this conversation to you. And I invite you to start it with each other. The question of "What is our welcome to be?" sits at the heart of it. We may at some point begin sharing our thoughts as a community. I'll invite us to include a look at our Mission statement - who it is we say we are.

This is the work before us Messiah, that we begin in view of the empty tomb. And we do it in hopes that all those whom we welcome might step off the wilderness road and find here not only welcome but water.

AMEN