

April 28, 2024  
Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B  
Grace Church, Muncie  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Acts 8:26-40*

*Psalms 22:24-30*

*1 John 4:7-21*

*John 15:1-8*

Alleluia, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen, indeed. Alleluia!

This morning, I want us to think about community; in particular, the community that is part and parcel of life in God. We live in a world that idolizes individualism. Many like to think that life in God is purely about “my personal relationship” with God, or with Jesus. But the scriptures tell us another story.

For example, in this morning’s reading from the first letter of John, we read, *Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God* (1. John 4:7). It is through the loving of others that we come to know God. Others are required.

One of the earliest lessons of childhood is, “don’t talk to strangers.” It is a useful caution, particularly for children. But what if it becomes a way of life? When I was growing up, and still today, on occasion, I am uncomfortable talking to someone new. What will they say? What will I say? What will they want from me? What do I assume they believe? What assumptions will they make about me? Now and then, I have anxiety about strangers. Perhaps you do, as well.

In the Book of Acts, back in chapter 6, Philip (the deacon, not the apostle), had been busy preaching about Jesus in Samaria. Wait a minute...Samaria? We learned in Sunday School that Samaritans were outsiders and strangers. Nevertheless, Philip had had some success in Samaria, even converting Simon the Magician.

One day, an angel of the Lord shows up, as they do, and tells Philip to get on his way down to Gaza. Yes, that Gaza. The Gaza for which we pray earnestly for peace every day. The angel doesn’t tell Philip why, only to get going.

We are also told that the road to Gaza “is a wilderness road.” From working among strangers in Samaria to walking down a road in the middle of the wilderness – doesn’t really sound like a promotion, does it? With nothing and no one on this road, it seems like a waste to send this successful deacon to such a barren place.

And then...

And then, in the wilderness, out on the edge of nothing, Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch, a man who must have seemed a stranger in many ways. He is a man

interested enough in the God of Israel to have made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but according to Hebrew law, he must remain in the outer courts of the Temple, unable to join the rest of the Jewish community (Deuteronomy 23:2).

He is a Black man from Africa. He is a man of rank and privilege, a royal official in charge of his queen's treasury. At the same time, he is also a powerless outsider — a man whose physical being doesn't fit into acceptable social patterns.

When Philip hears him reading a passage from Isaiah, he decides (OK, to be fair, the angel tells him) to go and talk to this stranger, "Do you understand what you're reading?" And the Ethiopian replies, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And Philip climbs into the chariot and explains the scriptures, proclaiming the good news about Jesus. Then, upon seeing water, the Ethiopian asks "what is to prevent me from being baptized?" The rest, as they say, is history.

Let's pause here for a moment and marvel at this odd scene of stranger talking to stranger. I was raised to read this story as a conversion story, a one-way story of Philip converting the stranger. The lesson being that I was to go out and share the good news as often and as loudly as possible, so that strangers ("them") might change and become more like "us."

But we miss some of the significance of this story if we see Philip simply as the teacher. Philip is also a student, and what he learns from the eunuch has a great deal to tell us about life in the risen Christ.

Because, when this long-rejected religious outcast sees some water by the roadside, his question to Philip "the expert" isn't "what must I do to be baptized?" Instead, he asks, "what is to prevent me from being baptized?" and he commands the chariot to stop. Philip doesn't say a word. Theologian Willie James Jennings describes the story of the eunuch this way: "Faith found the water. Faith will always find the water."<sup>1</sup>

In seeing the Ethiopian eunuch respond to God's word, to the Spirit's invitation to belong in full, Philip is led by that same Spirit to his own conversion, turning upside down everything he might have thought about insiders and outsiders, about piety and impiety, about identity and belonging. Life in the risen Christ really is new, and different. Even in the desert, among strangers, the Spirit grows the church — just add water and immerse.

The Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip, "How can I understand, unless someone guides me." Neither he nor we can understand Scripture, or God, for that matter, all on our own. Life in God requires community.

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<sup>1</sup> *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

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In today's Gospel, the image of Jesus as the True Vine (like the image of Jesus the Good Shepherd we explored last week) presupposes community. There are no lone rangers in the sheepfold or in the vineyard.

Some time ago, I came across a teaching on this passage that I want to share with you today. It is by William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury during WWII, from a collection of sermons from the time he was headmaster of Repton School.

By way of set-up, what happens just before today's reading is the scene in the upper room, with the foot washing and the new commandment. It ends with Jesus saying, "rise, let us be on our way." And out they go out into the night, made bright by the Passover moon. Now, to Archbishop Temple.

"The little group, who had just shared with the Lord his last supper upon earth, had left the upper chamber, and were crossing the temple court. There in front of them, trailing over the Temple Gate, was the great Golden Vine, the type [=symbol] of the life of Israel, entwined about the sanctuary of God.<sup>2</sup> And, as they look at it, our Lord begins to speak — surely, with a hand pointing to this vine and with a gentle smile upon his face — "I am the true vine." It is the last of those seven parables of his person and mission, introduced by the words "I am," which are given us by St. John. In Christ the disciples were to find the fulfilment of that long search and hope which the Old Testament records through lawgiver, historian, prophet, and psalmist. All that life is summed up and completed in him. He is the true Vine.

"And we, his disciples," Temple continues, "are the branches. He is not the trunk or the stem, on which we grow. He is the whole vine, whose branches we are, for we are members of Christ, limbs of his body...So St. Paul tells the Corinthians: 'Now you are the Body of Christ, and individually members of it.' There is some part of the Church's life which waits till we are willing to live it."

There is some part of the Church's life which waits until we are willing to live it. There is a slogan that occasionally appears on the MadJax sign, just up the block that says "There is work in the world only you can make." This is the reason God calls you, and you, and you, and on, and on, and on, into community.

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<sup>2</sup> Josephus described the golden vine thus: But that gate which was at this end of the first part of the house [=Temple] was, as we have already observed, all over covered with gold, as was its whole wall about it; it had also golden vines above it, from which clusters of grapes hung as tall as a man's height. Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 5.5.4.

The work to which God calls you is to witness to, to rejoice in, those places where God's love is becoming fully present: in this parish community, in Muncie, on the wilderness road, among strangers, and with those whom society has rejected.

Talk to strangers. More importantly, listen to strangers. The Spirit's promise is that, in this exchange of witness to God's work in our lives and in the world, we shall, like Philip, be changed, be converted, turning upside down everything we might have thought about insiders and outsiders, about piety and impiety, about identity and belonging.

The question is whether you are willing to live into that particular part of life in God which is yours alone, and to which you are called. Community requires every single last one of you, of us, in order to thrive.

And, on the days that seems too hard, when loving the stranger seems to take more effort than you can muster, remember whose vine you are a part of – the True Vine. We are able to love because, and only because, God first loved us. Everything else is a matter of paying attention to the new growth.

In God's vineyard, God doesn't stake and string us, like pole beans. What God does do is enfold us, as we just sang.

God is Love; and Love enfolds us,  
all the world in one embrace:  
with unfailing grasp God holds us,  
every child of every race.<sup>3</sup>

When we are held in God's loving embrace, we can, without fear, stretch wide our arms with everything we have, eager to embrace all and each. There is some part of the Church's life that is waiting for you. Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. Amen.

Alleluia, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy Rees, 1874-1939.