

**5 Easter
April 29, 2018**

**In the name of the God of all Creation;
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus;
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

The gospels contain a number of references to vineyard and vines.

- *‘For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. (MT 20:1, LK 20:9)*
- *‘What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” (MT 21:28)*
- *Then he began to speak to them in parables. ‘A man planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a pit for the wine press, and built a watch-tower; then he leased it to tenants and went to another country. (MK 12:1)*
- *Then he told this parable: ‘A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. (LK 13:6)*

And then there is the reading from John’s gospel that we heard this morning:

“I am the vine, you are the branches ...” (JN 15:5)

Jesus used these stories because vineyards were well known to the people who listened to him. However, vineyards did not always evoke a positive image. Vineyards required land, the investment of grape arbors, fences, and the grape vines themselves. And then there was no return on the investment for several years while the grape vines grew and matured, yet there was still the cost of labor to prune the vines, and guard the vineyard. Only the very, very wealthy could afford that kind of investment, and the time to wait for the investment to provide a return. They were the “one percent” of Jesus’ day. But Jesus wasn’t talking to the vineyard owners. His audience were the vineyard workers. Those that had been forced off their land in foreclosures, then hired to work on what was once their own property. When seen in this light, the parables about vineyards and vines take on a different slant.

And even in Jesus time grape vines were usually grafted onto root stock. Some grape varieties had strong roots that were resistant to disease, and rot, and drought ... but they did not produce an abundance of good grapes. So vineyard owners would graft good vines to strong root stocks. It is the same thing they do to citrus trees here in Florida. If you haven’t noticed just take a look at the orange, and lemon, and tangerine, and grapefruit trees that they sell at Home Depot or any local nursery.

“I am the vine, you are the branches ...”

In the 1950s and 1960s there was a bishop in the Diocese of Virginia who planted apple trees in the churchyard of almost every congregation in the Diocese. When he visited each church to confirm new Episcopalians he would take them out to the apple tree and make a cut on a branch of the tree and graft in sprig from a tree that was growing at his home. It was an object lesson about being grafted into this expression of the Christian faith ... and it was very effective.

However, the story I heard ... more than once ... was about the church who called a new rector from a large city in the Northeast. His office overlooked a small stream that flowed next to the church, but his view was blocked by a tree growing just outside his window, so he cut it down. I don't think I need to finish the story ...

In the reading from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles this morning we heard the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. It is the story where the metaphor of a vine and branches is very appropriate. It is a story about the inclusion of someone, who by many of the standards of the day, should have been excluded.

According to the text from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, Philip was with Peter in Jerusalem until an angel came to him and sent him to the wilderness ... the road heading southwest from Jerusalem to Gaza. It was there that he met an Ethiopian eunuch who was traveling along the road. In many ways this is a strange story ... one of those that is a little hard to imagine actually happening as it is written. However, it is a good example of "just because it didn't happen doesn't mean it isn't true." And I think if we can hear it as one of those early readers of the Book of the Acts of the Apostle would have heard it, then we can see how it is very relevant for our time and our circumstances.

An Ethiopian eunuch: The story tells us that he was the Treasurer of the Queen of Ethiopia. We can surmise that he was wealthy, powerful, and learned. He had traveled to Jerusalem specifically to worship in the Temple ... however, he was not Jewish.

Here is what an early reader of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles would have known from just that much of the story: First, he was a foreigner. As an Ethiopian he was a black-skinned African ... not just olive-skinned but black-skinned. Secondly, the fact that he had traveled to Jerusalem would have indicated that he was a "God-worshipper" ... a Gentile who accepted the theological and ethical teachings of Judaism, and worshipped in the synagogues, yet without becoming full a convert. Thirdly, he was a eunuch: a castrated male and therefore, by Jewish purity laws, he would not have been able to be accepted into the community or much of the community's common life. And finally, being a gentile, as well as being a eunuch, would have kept him from entering into the Temple precincts where Jewish men would be worshipping, in spite of his wealth and power. Thus, the reader would have known that his pilgrimage to Jerusalem had been in vain. He had been rejected by the very institution that represented the faith that he felt drawn to.

Yet the Ethiopian eunuch had not given up in anger. Even as he was journeying to his home he was still reading the Jewish scripture ... a sign that he was educated as well as wealthy and powerful. That is when he encountered Philip. He asked Philip to assist him in interpreting a portion of the prophet Isaiah:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him."

The Ethiopian eunuch asked Philip of whom the prophet was speaking, and at that Philip began proclaiming the good news about Jesus.

In his mission to Samaria, the apostle Philip had already broken through the ancient barriers of religion and race which bred tremendous hostility between Jews and Samaritans. Now he was prepared to take on a third serious barrier ... sexuality.

Philip's heroism and leadership is understated in the New Testament. He was an amazing man of deep faith and great courage. He not only baptized those whose race and religion were problems for the guardians of "right-religion" in Jerusalem, but now he gladly received into the Christian sect of Judaism a man whose sexuality was a problem for the temple elite.

Since the Ethiopian eunuch was reading from the prophet Isaiah it is possible that he had discovered the passage that refers to foreigners, such as Samaritans and Ethiopians, and also refers to eunuchs:

Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, "The LORD will surely separate me from his people"; and do not let the eunuch say, "I am just a dry tree." For thus says the LORD: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. (Isaiah 56:3-8a)

Remember that the Book of the Acts of the Apostles describes events that were happening in the infancy of what we now call the Christian Church, but at that time these followers of "The Way" were just a sect of Judaism. Today, we know baptism as a Christian ritual. But the act of baptism predates Christianity ... remember Jesus was Jewish, and he was baptized by John in the Jordan River.

With that in mind the Ethiopian felt he had found a way into the community of faith ... Judaism ... which he loved. Therefore, the question that pops out of the Ethiopian's mouth was an honest one. "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Philip responds to the Ethiopian's query with bold action. Philip had proclaimed the good news of Jesus. Now, he makes a witness to his words: He baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch. And with that, the Ethiopian eunuch "went on his way rejoicing"

for at last he had become a full member of the household of faith. He had been grafted into the root stock of Christianity.

"I am the vine, you are the branches ..."

I think that this story from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles speaks loudly to the Church as it struggles to witness the good news to the world around us. If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, how do we, as a congregation and as a larger church community, make room for those who are often marginalized?

You see, I believe the most important question before us is not about sexuality. It is about witness. It is about the question "What witness will we make?"

Our witness is the public affirmation of our faith. It is how we let the world see that we practice what we preach. This is our opportunity to be what we say we are. We witness to what we believe. We believe in the Bible. We believe in the Good News. And we believe in taking seriously what Jesus took seriously. In fact, we believe so strongly in all of these essential parts of our shared faith that we are not afraid to disagree with one another about what they mean to us. We welcome difference as the active presence of God's Spirit moving amongst us. Our witness is not to conformity but rather to community. As a community of faith that welcomes diversity we are not concerned that everyone in the pews believes exactly the same thing, in the same way, at the same time. Instead, we are concerned that no one is left out of those pews because of what they believe ... or who they are ... or where they come from.

Our witness is to the unconditional love of God. There are no gate-keepers at the doors of this church. As we proclaim in our Baptismal Covenant "we respect the dignity of every human being," and are never ashamed of who sits next to us in worship. We are all the children of God.

We believe that God is at work in the world. We are not concerned that this world sees us as perfect, pure, or powerful. Instead, we are concerned that people see us practicing justice, doing mercy, and walking humbly with the God we believe loves us all equally.

Philip proclaimed the good news of Jesus to those of different race, religion, nationality, and even sexuality. He proclaimed the good news of Jesus. And then he included all in that proclamation by boldly witnessing to faith. May we ... the people of St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church in the historic neighborhood of Lincolnville in the nation's oldest city have the courage to do the same

The story of the Ethiopian eunuch is about including someone who would otherwise be excluded. The Church and our society are struggling with that same issue today. We ...

in this particular community of faith ... proclaim God's unconditional love, and God's unconditional love includes everyone and excludes no one.

"I am the vine, you are the branches."

Amen.