

The Ethiopian Eunuch

That first Scripture passage we heard today, from the Book of Acts, highlights a disciple of Jesus who we do not often hear much about, being willing to be led by the Holy Spirit to do an amazing and remarkable thing. Philip obeyed the Holy Spirit in going to talk with the Ethiopian eunuch. According to church tradition, that eunuch went back to the Queen of Ethiopia, told her about Jesus Christ, and she believed, too. She then ordered the conversion of her whole country to Christianity. Prior to the overthrow of Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia in the 1970's, the Ethiopian government claimed to be the oldest established Christian country in the world.

Philip spread the Good News, because he was connected to Jesus Christ through the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the history of a country in Africa was changed. This morning, I want to look at something Jesus tells His followers in John's Gospel. If we, and other Jesus' followers today, really took it to heart, it could potentially change us, our histories, and our world. If you have a Bible or Bible app handy, turn with me to John 15:1-8. **Read John 15:1-8.**

I love when Jesus uses visuals that I understand, as He does in today's Gospel lesson. He says, "I am the true vine, and My Father is the Gardener. He cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful," (John 15:1-2). When I read this, I automatically think of grape vines – vineyards. A well-tended vineyard is a beautiful sight.

Vineyards

Kendra, the girls, and I try at least once a summer to get up to Put-in-Bay. We have ever since I started being a lay delegate to annual conference when it met at Lakeside. There are a couple wineries on South Bass Island – Heineman's is my favorite. They have the best concord grape juice I've ever tasted. It's unpasteurized, and so you can't buy it anywhere else. From their store, you can see their vineyard – row after row of grape vines, supported by nearly invisible trellises because of all the growth.

Throughout our Gospel lesson today, Jesus tells us to "Remain in Me," four different times, in three different verses. In verse 4, He states, "Remain in Me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me." In verse 5 He tells us, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing." Again we hear Jesus tell us to remain in Him, in verse 7: "If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

With that particular verse, verse 7, like last week, we need to have clarity. We can't ask God to give us a million dollars because we'd like a new car, a nice fancy house, or other materialistic stuff. He doesn't work that way. Rather, when we're connected to Jesus, we produce fruit that pleases Him. What sort of fruit are we talking about? Paul tells us in the 5th chapter of Galatians: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."

Cucumbers

There was once a man who planted cucumbers in his backyard. He made sure the ground was well prepared. He bought the best cucumber seeds, and got to work with the skill of a person who had planted cucumbers for many years. To his delight, soon he had cucumber vines all over his backyard. The plants were green and healthy. But one day, he noticed that some of the leaves didn't look quite as green as the others.

A few days later, some the leaves were as good as dead. He followed the vines with the dead leaves until he got back to the main plant. There, at the base of the main stem, he noticed that some kind of fat grub had almost eaten through the stem. The cucumber plant was dependent on that main stem for water and nourishment. Life giving sap flowed from the main stem to the branches and enabled high-quality, delicious fruit to appear.

It's not possible to produce fruit without being connected to the stem. Even though the man had cultivated the ground carefully and watered his cucumber plant daily, the cucumber vines were unable to receive the goodness, so they withered and died. In a very similar way, as followers of Jesus, we need connection to our Vine – Jesus Christ. We are dependent on Him for everything we need in our daily lives – from food, health, family and good friends, to love, forgiveness, hope, comfort, and eternal life.

Grafted in at Our Baptism

Notice what Jesus says in between all the times He talks about remaining in Him. "If you do not remain in Me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned," (verse 6). Apart from Jesus, we would be like the cucumber vine with its wilting leaves. Without being joined to the main stem and roots, we would die.

We were grafted into Christ at our baptism. When the waters of baptism flowed over us – in however that configuration happened, whether by sprinkling, immersion, or pouring – we were automatically grafted into the Vine. In that moment we became intimately connected to Him, His death and resurrection, and received from Him all that we need to sustain our lives.

As His followers, we're connected to Him when we come together to worship, and when we hear His word. It doesn't matter how much we think we know about the Bible, or how many times we have read it, we need the life-giving nutrients that His word offers us, read and studied in community. He tells us, "you are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you," (verse 3). We're joined to Jesus when we come together around His table to receive the Sacrament of Holy Communion. He refreshes us, and frees us from the guilt of our sin.

Our faith is strengthened through the nourishment of God's word, and the Sacraments of the Church. The Holy Spirit works through these and equips our life in Christ to grow – to make us strong, and keep us close to God when we face the trials and troubles of life in a sin-sickened creation. The last thing Dad ate before he died on the 20th were the elements of Holy Communion. He had the bread and cup on April 12.

Abiding, Remaining, Being Joined

I know this is a very simplistic way to look at things, but friends, if we don't eat and drink on a daily basis, we become sick and may even die. Likewise, as branches of the True Vine – Jesus Christ – we are kept healthy and alive because we are connected to the Source of Life. When you look at different English Bible translations, they have a variety of words to describe this connection. Some talk of "abiding," others, like the NIV, say "remaining," still others say "being joined." The thing that's clear here is that being connected to Jesus Christ is critical for us if we want to have a full – and fulfilling – life.

Now here's where the rubber meets the road. When we plant a cucumber patch, we expect to have a crop of cucumbers. From a grape vine, we expect a crop of sweet, juicy grapes – not sour ones. I know, you look around in churches across America, you can see a lot of sour grapes. Sometimes I can be one, too. We want sweet grapes – we like sweet grapes – and we want to be sweet grapes. The sweeter, the better.

Jesus is the Vine. We are branches, from us, Jesus says He expects a lot of fruit – good fruit. Practical fruit. If we're really joined to Christ, we can't look the other way when someone is in need. We can't cross the street to avoid a person with whom we've had a disagreement.

Bearing Good Fruit

We can't hold back our forgiveness. As branches grafted to Christ, we try to be understanding and helpful. We're encouraging, and we seek reconciliation instead of adding fuel to disharmony. It means we show love and patience to those whom we don't think deserve it. This nice picture of the vine, branches, and fruit isn't a theoretical thing. It's not having a nice, warm feeling about being closely connected to Jesus. It's not something we nod heads in agreement to in worship, and then forget about until

next time. Bearing good fruit isn't optional. It's a requirement. And friends, we have a whole lot of brothers and sisters who need to hear this in our society today.

They think they can pay lip service to Jesus, play church, and act high and mighty, and that everything will be alright. That's not how it works. To get the good crop, the branches have to be pruned. All the useless stuff in our lives needs cut away. In a worldly sense, our so-called "leaves" probably look pretty good. Some of our branches are pretty thick – but they aren't producing. Jesus tells us, "This is to My Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be My disciples," (verse 8).

In the late 1800's there were very wealthy men, and women, in our country who did anything they could to make a buck. And they didn't care who they trampled on to get to the top. They were called "robber barons." They owned the railroads, banks, mines – you name it. Folks like John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, J.P. Morgan, and Cornelius Vanderbilt to name a few. In business, it might be acceptable to disregard others to get ahead. For the fruit of generosity, kindness, and humility to grow, we have to cut that away.

Sometimes We Have to Cut Things Away

It may be okay for some to commit adultery, to stab people in the back, or participate in some other harmful action that endangers health, and leads others astray. If we're showing the fruit of care, understanding, and self-control, we have to cut that away. Maybe sometimes we're tempted to think it's alright to be grumpy and intolerant of your spouse, your kids, or grandkids. If we're growing the fruit of love, peace, and patience, we have to cut that away.

If we're bearing the kind of fruit Jesus is looking for, we have to prune – cut away – all the junk so that the Holy Spirit can make the real good fruit grow. Again, that's the fruit of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control," (Gal. 5:22-23). None of this is easy. It's human nature to prefer to be selfish and greedy.

It's easier to ignore people than to help them, to be hurtful and critical than to encourage and comfort others. We can't do the cutting away by ourselves. We need the Master Gardener to give us the strength and the will to want to change. We need the Holy Spirit to help us cut out the deadwood of sin from our lives, so we can grow beautiful fruit.

And that's why it's absolutely necessary for us to stay connected to the Vine. From Jesus Christ, we receive the spiritual food we need to live as His followers – His hands and feet in the world today. We receive forgiveness for our failures, and grow in our understanding of what it means to be baptized into His death and resurrection in our everyday lives. We need the living blood of Christ – the sap of the Vine – to make us all branches bearing good fruit.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, You sent Your Son into the world that we might live through Him. May we abide in His risen life so that we may bear the fruit of love for others and truly know the fullness of joy. Amen.