

Let us pray... Abiding God. Teach us to live in you and how to leave space for others with love... Gather us into your vine and send us forth into community, sharing the fruits of your Spirit... Amen.

You may have noticed that our first reading throughout this season of Easter has not been from the Old Testament, but rather has been from the Book of Acts...

And the Book of Acts picks up after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, and follows the early church and how the Spirit was working among the people of God, urging them to follow an unrestrained God into the world...

And today's reading in Acts shows us, just how unpredictable that road can be, by shedding light on a strange, but beautiful road where we encounter an Ethiopian Eunuch and Philip.

And Philip was one of the first Christ followers... And even though he wasn't one of the 12 disciples, he was lifted up as a deacon and a leader in the church during those early days.

And he started serving the church by quite literally serving... Serving food to widows until everything turned upside down and descended into chaos.

A horrific kind of chaos, as Christ followers were being arrested, and even killed... Causing a frenzied exit from the city of Jerusalem...

And Philip was among this mass exodus, where he made his way to Samaria and started preaching...

And Philip was surprisingly good at this... His preaching converted the hearts of many, and Samaria became a place of missionary success for the early church...

And so, I can imagine that Philip was excited for what was next... Perhaps, dreaming of going to faraway lands and exotic cities to convert the hearts of others...

But instead, he is told to get up and go... To go to a wilderness road, a deserted place without a single village...

Which had to be disappointing... And yet he got up and went...

And to his surprise, he runs into an Ethiopian Eunuch, a court official who has in his possession a rare scroll of Isaiah...

And from this unique encounter a beautiful conversation unfolds... Where the Ethiopian Eunuch asks Philip to guide him through Scripture...

And as they were embarking on this journey through Scripture, riding through a desert, the Eunuch happens to look up and exclaims,

Look here is water! What is preventing me from being baptized?

And friends let me tell you... In the early church... In the days before flushed out doctrine or even a Bible... A lot was keeping this outsider from being baptized...

And yet Philip, moved by the Spirit, did not let these manmade restrictions get in his way, and he baptized him right then and there...

Because the act of baptism is not about the one performing it... The act of baptism is all about God...

As it is God who welcomes the newly baptized into the body of Christ...

Where all are welcomed into an abiding relationship in the Holy God Triune...

Where Christ abides in us, so that we may know God, and love God by loving others...

Which is what our gospel is all about today... In a nutshell Jesus was saying,

If you want to love God, you have to love Jesus. If you want to love Jesus, you have to love each other.

Because loving God is all about relationships... As we are all connected together in Christ...

Which is why our reading from Acts ties in so beautifully with our gospel...

As the Ethiopian church today traces their origins back to this very Eunuch...

This brief encounter, this Holy Baptism, has had real impacts on people's lives for centuries... Showing us how strong the bonds of connection are in Christ.

And yet, how it looked to Philip that day was anything but impressive... He went from preaching in a thriving city converting the hearts of many...

To the wilderness, a place deserted of life and people...

And yet so much good news came out of this place...

As Anna Carter Florence shares, "This is a good story to read when we need to remind ourselves what success is all about. It isn't about the accolades. It isn't about the numbers. It's about the one eunuch who is waiting for us on a wilderness road, with a chariot built for two."

It's about going that extra distance for someone... Even if it is out of your comfort zone... Even if they have a different outlook on life, or come from a different culture...

As the Spirit calls us to love others and to do so by showing up for them...

Which is the same kind of love that Jesus was talking about today...

Abiding love... Love that reveals the deep interconnections of creation...

Just as branches are connected to a vine, so too does fruit need the assistance of outside pollinators...

This is a fruitful and interconnected ecosystem of faith that Jesus is talking about...

One that recognizes that intricate relationships are necessary for the vitality of life...

Pushing against living in isolation...

Because that was not how God created life...

Which is why Jesus said, "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

This is not a metaphor for burning in hell... This is Jesus' warning against living in isolation. As living with an isolated mindset severs our ties from community, and community in Christ...

It is a pushback against growth for the sake of growth because that kind of growth can be detrimental to others.

For example, when I was in college, I learned about an invasive species in America called kudzu... It is a vine that grows so fast it can take down powerlines and causes mass destruction...

This is not the kind of vine Jesus was talking about, growth just for the sake of growth... When we focus only on ourselves...

Rather, Jesus was talking about a life-giving vine, the kind of vine that is interconnected with all of creation...

When life is weaved together to create more life... Inviting us to weave our time together while we still can...

And what a better way to start weaving our time together than engaging in ministry together.

From fundraising to outreach, to engaging in worship, youth ministry, adult ministry, and so much more.

Now is the time to come together and share your gifts so you can thrive... And so, others can thrive...

By sharing nourishment, time, and love... The kind of love that Jesus cultivates from the depths of his vine, so everyone may experience the vitality of God...

As this is a God who springs forth water on a wilderness road... A God who calls you to love others, by showing up for them... A God who encourages you to go the distance, so that God's love may abide in all places... Amen.