

## E5B 2024 Acts 8:26-40 & John 15:1-8

Our synod youth trip to Florida last summer ended with closing worship on the beach. Pastor Eric, who served the church that hosted our group, intended to start the service with Thanksgiving for Baptism similar to the rite we've been using at the beginning of our worship during the Easter season. In good Lutheran form, he clarified that this was not the sacrament of baptism but a *remembrance*, and then he said something to the effect of *because you've all already been baptized, right?* Except two of the youth shook their heads: no, they weren't baptized. Pastor Eric seemed a little surprised, but then said, *Well, there's a whole ocean here. Do you want to be?* And they said, *yeah, we do.* But wait...baptism without their parents or their home pastors, without godparents or sponsors, without a class or a workbook or a catechism, without white robes or candles or anointing oil, or bulletins or certificates or even a church building. Oh my! You'd think we'd never read the book of Acts before. *Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?* The answer, the text implies, is *nothing*. And that's how I ended up helping to baptize a couple of teenagers in the Gulf of Mexico.

I joke, but the church hasn't always acted like we understand or believe this passage from Acts. An angel of the Lord sends Philip to the wilderness road leading south from Jerusalem where he encounters a worshiper returning home from a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The Ethiopian eunuch was by every measure an outsider to Philip: a different race, a different nationality, a different economic class, a different gender. His position, though important, could indicate that he enslaved. Religiously, he worships the God of Israel and reads Hebrew scripture, but we don't know whether he is Jewish, like Philip, or aspiring to conversion. What we do know is that these differences would have limited his access to the temple and excluded him from fully participating in society. We also know he can read in a chariot without getting motion sickness.

The Ethiopian eunuch asks Philip about the passage he is studying from Isaiah. We don't hear Philip's full lesson but the short version is that he proclaims the good news about Jesus. How refreshing—that instead of arguing with a stranger over the finer points of scripture Philip instead shares good news—which proves a pretty effective evangelism strategy. Because as soon as they come across water, the eunuch asks *What is to prevent me from being baptized?* This comes across as a rhetorical question, because Philip responds by baptizing him. But we can imagine that for someone who has not experienced full inclusion in so many aspects of life, the question was an earnest one: *What is preventing me from being part of the community of Christ?*

If we are going to reckon honestly with our legacy as members of the Christian Church, we have to confess that Christians traditionally have given an embarrassingly long list of wrong answers to that question—listing many stipulations and restrictions on participation in the body of Christ—as if it's our job to be gatekeepers. Philip shows us that the answer is *nothing*—there's nothing to prevent someone who wants to be part of God's family from being included. Yet how

often has especially the Western church forgotten that one of the very first baptized Christians was an enslaved foreigner, an African accountant of non-binary gender. This is who the Spirit sent Philip to baptize, and a whole branch of the Christian church—a branch much older than ours—points to this conversion as their origin story.

All those branches that make God's church so diverse began with Jesus, who proclaims: *I am the vine, you are the branches*. The job of the branches is to produce fruit, which they can only do when they are connected to the vine. I've been doing a lot of yard work lately, which has reminded me that I am no gardener; but even I know that if you cut off a branch, it's only a matter of time before it withers. Jesus wants us to think similarly of him: abiding—that is, remaining, staying, living, connecting, communing—with him is how we continue to be nourished in the abundant life of God, and from that abundant life, we bear the fruit of gentle, joyful, patient, peaceful, faithful loving-kindness toward others. Yet Jesus' words are not a command—*be a good branch; bear lots of fruit*—because branches can't really will themselves to produce beyond the conditions they are given. The only imperative Jesus gives is *Abide in me as I abide in you*. Stay connected, and the rest will take care of itself.

If we take Jesus' words at face value—*we are the branches*—then we have to recognize what we're not: *we are not the gardener*. It's not our job to monitor how much fruit is growing on other branches. It's not our job to prune other branches or to decide which branches ought to be cut off. Playing spiritual gardener is a favorite pastime of believers, but that's not who and what we are called to be. We are called to abide in Jesus, which makes us part of one really big family tree.

After the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away, if the Ethiopian eunuch went back to his reading, in just a few more chapters, he would have come to these words of Isaiah:

*...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... I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord...these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples...*

These promises of God were realized for the Ethiopian eunuch when, by baptism, he was grafted onto the True Vine, just as we are grafted onto the True Vine when we're baptized. That unity is God's vision for the whole of humanity, such that if anyone should ask, *What is to prevent me from being part of God's family?* we know to answer, *Nothing can separate you from the love of God*. May we never be the reason another branch feels cut off from the Vine; instead, may we abide in the love of Jesus who is ever teaching us to abide in love with one another.