

5 Easter, Year B, May 3, 2015; St. John's, Olds
Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:24-30; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8;

The Gospel reading is about being fruitful in our connection with Jesus Christ and with God. The image is of a vine with its branches, and Jesus says 'I am the vine and my Father is the vinegrower.' We often forget that phrase about the Father being the vinegrower. The vinegrower has no work without the vine and the vine doesn't grow well without the attention of the vinegrower. The vinegrower removes every branch that does not bear fruit, and prunes every branch that does bear fruit so that it will be more fruitful. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. The words 'remove,' 'prune' and 'cleansed' are all translated from the same Greek word.

Jesus goes on to say that just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can his disciples engage in fruitful ministry unless they abide in him, take up residence in him. Those branches who abide in me, the true vine, he says, bear much fruit, but apart from me you can do nothing. Jesus reminds us over and over that we are dependent on him and each other and all depend on God who is the vinegrower in this figure or illustration. None of us are self-sufficient. Jesus concludes that 'My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.' Abiding in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is what allows us to be fruitful on God's behalf.

And the kind of fruitfulness that Jesus is speaking about is well-illustrated by the reading from Acts. When the religious leaders in Jerusalem began persecuting the Christians after Jesus rose from the dead, the Christians were dispersed farther afield, and we meet Philip who now lives in Caesarea Maritima north of Jerusalem on the coast. This is not Philip of Bethsaida who is one of the twelve apostles, this is Philip the Evangelist who was among the Greek speaking converts to Christianity after Pentecost. He is mentioned in chapter 6 of Acts as one of seven people chosen to deal with concerns about food distribution to the Greek speaking Christians especially the widows. He is described as a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.

In chapter 8 the Spirit speaks through an angel to Philip who tells him to get up and go toward the south, to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. So he got up and went. And there he comes upon an Ethiopian who is the keeper of the Queen of Ethiopia's treasure, a court official. He is not a convert to the Jewish faith but he is a God-fearer and has been to Jerusalem to worship God in the Temple and is now on his way home. As Philip comes near he hears him reading aloud from the prophet Isaiah, and he recognizes the passage and asks if the man understands what he is reading. The man invites him to explain this scripture to him. And when he understands what Philip tells him about Jesus he embraces the good news and when they see some water the man says in no uncertain terms that he wants to be baptized and Philip does so. The Ethiopian went on his rejoicing. Philip was snatched away by the Spirit and proceeded to proclaim the good news of God in Jesus Christ in every town he came to until he reached home again.

When the Ethiopian official arrived back in Ethiopia we surmise that he was very busy also proclaiming the good news of God in Christ because Ethiopia was one of the first countries to declare the Christian faith to be its official faith in the year 330. There are cave churches in Ethiopia, some as old as the 6th century some from the 13th century, that are still in use as places of worship. It started with one person meeting another person and sharing about the meaning of Jesus Christ's life, death and resurrection.

Clearly they were both familiar with the scriptures and Philip was full of the Holy Spirit, but those two things should be common to all Christians. It takes a while to become familiar with the broad scope of the Bible. I met some folks in one of my parishes who had never actually read an entire book of the Bible from beginning to end. They did Bible Study but the studies they did were all themed studies, for instance, joy or repentance or love or the Holy Spirit. So they were quite astonished when we did a study that looked at just one book.

But we are to be fruitful and we cannot be fruitful for Christ if we do not abide in Christ and allow God to prune us, to get rid of our deadwood, spiritual, emotional, intellectual.

The Church as we all know is not a perfect group of people and we get into disputes with one another, because each of us has our own deadwood that needs to be pruned, and we like to guard it from others because it's ours. Congregations can be permeated by hate even as they claim to be Christ's disciples. The Church was no different in its early days than it is now in that regard. In the reading from the first letter of John to a church congregation there are some issues concerning how they love one another. This reading is an exhortation on loving one another.

If we are branches on the same vine that is Jesus Christ, then we have an intimate and organic relationship not just with Jesus but with one another as well. The writer stresses that God is the source of love, that love does not and cannot be derived from our own human capacity. It stems from God's own initiative. From verse 10 'In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation of our sins.'

Verse 8 and verse 16 tell us that God is love. The Hebrew understanding is that the Divine is a dynamic personal force who acts. To say that God is love is to say that God loves, in the sense that God's actions through history have been directed toward our ultimate well-being, and have been revealed among us in the coming of God's Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Our human capacity for love is not original. To be able to love as God loved when he sent us his Son is only possible through divine regeneration. Or to say it another way, when we love, it is proof that a divine seed has been sown in us. We know that children who are not loved have great difficulty their whole lives with loving others, so love is not some innate human characteristic, it comes from God.

Our knowledge of God can only really be defined in terms of love. Verse 8 says that whoever does not love does not know God. Therefore to say we love God and yet hate, despise or simply dismiss others as not worthy of notice, is not truth to the gospel. It cannot be done. Usually we lash out or give the cold shoulder to others even in the Church when we are afraid, when we have allowed ourselves to be dominated by fear, of change, of the unknown, of whatever might

rearrange our favourite ideas. Verse 18 reads: there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears is not perfected in love. (Notes on 1 John adapted from *Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year B, p. 258-259*)

The psalm reading is from Psalm 22 which begins My God, my God, why have you forsaken me. In the beginning part of the psalm the psalmist alternates between despairing that God is not with him in his troubles and proclaiming God as trustworthy, and is in an agony of indecision about whether God is actually hearing him or not. Then he comes to a point of decision and says he will tell everyone that God has saved him and he will praise God within the congregation. Then there are a couple of verses which commentators seem to agree is probably an exhortation to the congregation by the priest to gather together and praise God, who hears our cries of distress.

Today's reading is the heartfelt thanksgiving to God for being the God who is love, and receives all those in need with compassion and mercy.

When our deadwood gets in the way of being fruitful disciples for Christ then we need this kind of psalm to fortify us for the pruning that God does to those whom God loves so that we may be those who joyously share God's love in the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the name of the risen Lord, Alleluia! Amen.