

Y'all, I tried. I really tried to start this sermon off with a different analogy. But this is where we are.

We're starting off with an ask of all of you. I need you, for just a second, to sit in the silence of this space. And I'd like you to think of one of your favorite pump up songs. I mean, the sort of song that gets your blood pumping, or makes you feel determined that you can do anything. I'm talking Whitney Houston's "I wanna dance with somebody" or the Rocky theme, or Taylor Swift's "22", Stevie Wonder, Elvis, Led Zeppelin, I'm using Queen's "Don't stop me now".

That's the feeling I've had, the feeling that comes with that kind of song, all week.. ALL of today's readings come together to make about as full throated an expression of God's mission of love and our part in it as any that come up in church.

The readings all give off this pump up song energy as they all together say that there's nothing and nobody that can stop love's victory over sin and fear and death. Love wins.

Now I'm going to touch on all three readings today, so hang in there with me.

First, the Gospel says that Jesus is like a vine and that we're like branches. And that the branches that bear good fruit are kept to grow while the branches that bear nothing or bad fruit are cast away.

Now I love me some getting into hellfire and brimstone in scripture, but I think our reading from 1 John kinda nips the argument of eternal torment for sinners in the bud pretty quick this morning. He writes, "Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love."

We've got the Gospel and the vine keeping only the branches that bear fruit and John echoing Christ's call not to be afraid as love casts out fear and God IS love. God's mission is not punishment. It's love and

love is always growing, always moving, always nourishing and never stopping no matter how scary or hard or even horrible life can be sometimes.

Love casts out fear and the foundation of the universe is God who is love.

Alright, that the theology, but what does this all look like practically you might ask. Again, this morning's readings are so GOOD because Jesus' words and John's theology dive straight into the story of Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch.

And this is such a good reading from Acts. Because it's allllll about the Holy Spirit having no borders and that there are none who are excluded from the God's table.

What's most significant about this story is not just what happens, but who the characters are. And while we could spend time talking about Phillip and Queen Candace, we'll just focus on the Ethiopian for now. Because he is representative of how no one, no matter how seemingly strange they may be to us, no matter how we may even be frightened because we don't understand their culture or life experience, is excluded from God's love. AND that they should not be excluded from ours.

The Ethiopian eunuch is meant to represent the stranger, the foreigner, the immigrant, the unknown person. When Acts was written, it was written in a context of the Jewish faith and tradition, remember, at first Christianity was considered a sect of Judaism. And an Ethiopian eunuch was a person who was about as far removed from Judaism as could be, there were no direct ties from Judaism to Ethiopia. Not only that, that he was a eunuch precluded him from the faith based on the theology of the time based on a reading from Deuteronomy; the gender of the eunuch kept him from being part of the Jewish community of the time. Finally, of course, he just doesn't get the scripture.

For all these reasons, the Ethiopian is supposed to be a caricature of the last person who would receive the Gospel. And Phillip. A man. A regular dude, no different from you or I, not Jesus Christ, but instead a person who believed that the mission of love has no bounds.

He's the one that connects with the Ethiopian. They accept one another. They learn from one another. And the Good News that preaches there is no barrier to love spreads further.

Think of those you've been afraid of, people who you may think are the problem with the world. Think of yourself. And those places and sins in you that feel the darkest. Now if you've let it stop for a bit as I've gotten into the thick of preaching, put your soundtrack back on. Play your Twisted Sister's "We're not gonna take it" or your Bonnie Tyler's "Holding Out for a Hero" or your Johnny Cash's "One piece at a time." Cast off your fear and make way for wonder, burn off those branches of your soul that aren't producing love but fear, let yourself be whisked away by the Holy Spirit to possibilities unknown and unforeseen because that's where the Holy Spirit is going and you're welcome there too.