

Easter 5B. Acts 8:26-40; John 15:1-8. May 2, 2021.

If we came looking for easy answers today, then I'm afraid that we've come to the wrong place. Oh sure, we can turn to First John and see that God is love, and so if we are loving then we must be okay. It is the best litmus test—but it's not a fully formed program for discipleship. And when we turn to our other readings, what loving God and each other looks like gets a little more nuanced, a little more complex.

The Spirit tells Philip to get up and go to the wilderness road, without too much detail about what he's going to do when he gets there. Get up and go, go to the wilderness road. And Jesus on the night before he dies tells his disciples that the key to faithful life is to *abide* in him, as he will in them. Go—and abide. Maintain connections to deep roots—and get up and move out to the wilderness road. There may not be a profound contradiction here, but to take both of these images as formative for following Jesus, at the same time, may take a little work. We are a people who are called to get up and go . . . and at all times to abide.

This rich passage from Acts, of Philip doing bible study with the Ethiopian eunuch, is part of a building crescendo of the earliest church starting to fulfill Jesus' directive to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. After Pentecost, they start out in Jerusalem, Jewish Christians in the capital preaching the gospel to faithful Jews in the capital who are not Christians. And then as much of the church gets pushed out of Jerusalem, they flee with the gospel in their mouths and love in their hands and the mission starts to spread to the places of their escape. Philip starts out in a different region, in Samaria, before he is sent out to the wilderness road to meet this Ethiopian. We can see that though there is reason to think this guy might be Jewish, and Philip doesn't have to journey very far geographically, the unnamed Ethiopian eunuch is meant to signify the ends of the earth. If the center of the world is Jerusalem, then this guy is on the margins of the world. He is from a region that is used as a code word for exotic, almost legendary locales. And the mutilations he bears on his body put him into a ritual and social caste. His physical oppression is the very justification for his social oppression. And it is no coincidence that it is very specifically to him that the Spirit sends Philip.

We, too, are sent to the ends of the earth with the gospel in our mouths and love in our hands. And we, too, are called to remember that the map of the world is often folded, and the ends of the earth can come into very close proximity to us. We are unlikely to get directions as specific as Philip got, and we are very unlikely to get to use the divine teleportation machine Philip has access to. But in a way, we don't need new specific instructions. We inherit Philip's commission to the margins, to find those who are left out and remember that there is nothing to prevent them from being welcomed into the family of God. We and they are already God's beloved—the barriers are built by us, not by God.

Go, to the margins of the world. And: abide. Beginning this week and continuing through the rest of the Easter season, our gospel readings are from what is called Jesus' "farewell discourse." In John's gospel, Jesus talks to his disciples for four chapters on the night before he is killed, cramming in all the last things that he needs to tell them before the world will change forever. I'm not sure that they understood it much better than we will, but we'll understand enough to see the tenderness and care that Jesus has for his friends. And, make no mistake, this discourse is addressed to us as much as it is to them. Just as we inherit Philip's commission to the margins, so we inherit the promises and warnings of Jesus' last night with his friends.

This week I think is a reflection of a community that is suffering. God is the gardener, Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. The branches who become disconnected from the vine

don't bear fruit, wither, and die. No one has to kill them—disconnecting from the source of life leads to death all on its own, without anyone needing to punish. Those who maintain that connection will also suffer, but for them, rooted firmly to the source of life, the suffering is made into pruning rather than death. Throughout the gospel of John, rejecting relationship with Jesus is its own punishment: the judgment for rejecting relationship is not having relationship, for rejecting life not having life. I think that this passage is a suffering community saying that God has not made them suffer, but can turn their suffering into new life and growth.

And the key, here, whether we focus in on pruning or withering or bearing fruit is abiding in Jesus. I think this must point us toward contemplation, prayer, worship—a constant acknowledgement that our faithfulness depends on God's initiative, not our effort. Abiding in Jesus is not staying in the same place—it is maintaining our rootedness in the one who gives us life through prayer, worship, contemplation, and humility. This rootedness is what enables our radical action, what sustains our witness of truth and love. We are called to go and to abide. We can go because we abide. The one we are rooted in is the same one we follow to the margins to tell the ends of the earth and the ends of our own worlds that there is nothing to prevent them from joining the family of God. Let us go . . . and abide. Amen.