

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fifth Sunday of Easter - Year B

61st Week of Pandemic - Outdoor Worship (baptism of Lucas Coffman)

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Acts 8:26-40

Psalm 22:25-31

I John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

05/02/2021

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. John:

[Jesus said:] 1“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

The Gospel of our Lord

### **Prayer**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

## New Life

Good morning! When I read today's Gospel lesson last Sunday I thought "How perfect! A text about pruning and growing on the same day that we baptize the grandson of a master gardener!" BUT then I realized that I don't really know anything about gardening, and it's a struggle for me to keep anything alive. (If you don't believe me, come take a look at the cactus that I'm struggling to keep alive!) Fortunately, I read our first reading from Acts and it was like the lectionary planned this whole thing! (It's like the Holy Spirit might actually be at work, right?!) So, I hope you paid attention to the first lesson, because that's where we're going now.

But you have to give it to the fifth book of the New Testament. Acts of the Apostles, or Acts as we call it, is one of the most unique books in all of scripture. It is the only book in our bible that gives us an account of the ministry that happened with the early Church. Sadly, this incredible book often goes ignored. Matt Skinner, professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary summarizes the situation rather well, writing *"One reason why the book of Acts makes for great Easter preaching is the narrative's flair for the dramatic. Since the overall story is about a man raised from the dead, the arrival of God's Spirit to empower ordinary people to attempt extraordinary things, and the perseverance of a religious movement that asks its members to imitate the communitarian ethos of a man crucified by the Roman Authorities, perhaps no individual episode can be considered too incredible. Acts, like Easter, urges you to put cautious rationality on the shelf and follow an unrestrained God into the world,*

*wondering as you go what else might be possible. Both Acts and Easter want your imagination to run wild.”<sup>1</sup>*

And man, does this story live up to the hype! In Acts 8:26-40 our story begins with an angel of the Lord telling Phillip to head towards Gaza. The story tells us this casually, as if an angelic navigation system was something to be expected. Phillip, like every God-fearing person, follows his orders and sets out. Along the way he runs into an unnamed individual, a eunuch from Ethiopia who is in charge of the entire treasury for their queen.

A lot of speculation has gone into the background of this court official. The first question is regarding the official’s religious history, and why they were in Jerusalem. It seems most likely that the court official is either from Jewish descent, or what was called a “God-fearer,” someone who was sympathetic to the Jewish faith, but remained on the fringe. It’s also possible that they are a descendant of the many Jews that were taken away from Jerusalem in 587BCE when Babylon conquered Israel. This event, called the Diaspora, saw Jews spread out across the Fertile Crescent. While it can be tempting to say that our court official was a gentile, Dr. Skinner points out that Acts says that the first gentile converts are Cornelius and his household in the eleventh chapter. (11:18, 15:7)<sup>2</sup> So, while the court official doesn’t represent the first gentile convert, they DO represent the Gospel going out “to the ends of the earth.”<sup>3</sup> While Ethiopia is a real place, the court is possibly from a region south of Egypt. In the Greco-Roman world, which the writer of Acts was most definitely a product

---

<sup>1</sup><https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-acts-826-40>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 1:8 NRSV

of, an Ethiopian could mean someone who lived on the fringes of the world and was used to define the sub-Saharan area of Africa.<sup>4</sup> So, from the perspective of the author and audience, the court official truly represented the Gospel reaching the entirety of the known world.

So, when Phillip sees the chariot, the Holy Spirit gives him a nudge telling him to go check things out. It's at this point that I always smile. Phillip follows along and asks if the court official understands what was being read. Can you imagine how weird it would be for some random person to just come running up beside your car while you sat in traffic, listening along with you to whatever audiobook or podcast you had picked? Then they ask if you understood what they were talking about. I always imagine a winded Phillip, huffing and puffing along trying to keep up, asking the question between breaths "Do... you... under... stand... what... you... are... reading?" The official responds spectacularly, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

What a great question! And it captures perfectly the responsibility that a community of faith undertakes when they take part in the baptism of a beloved member. While the court official's baptism took place a little differently, especially with its ending, the need for guidance remains the same. And I pray to God that after we baptize Lucas I'm not taken up by the Holy Spirit and transported across the country!

When we gather around the font to witness God's amazing work, it can be tempting to think of the congregation as merely casual viewers, while the main players, me, Lucas in this example, and the family do the "baptizing." But this is wrong on two accounts. The first is that it leaves out

---

<sup>4</sup><https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-of-easter-2/commentary-on-acts-826-40>

the true main player: God. God is where the focus is during a baptism, because without this wonderful act of salvation we would have no reason to gather together. The second mistake is in not realizing the critical part that you all play too! When we baptize someone in the Lutheran Church we ask the congregation to take on the responsibility of helping to raise this person in the faith. This isn't something to take lightly! You're held accountable for the rest of their life!

Which is why a baptism is such a wonderful thing! In something as simple as water we see the power of a God who beat death and calls us all together to form a whole new community! And in those waters we hear the same question as that of the court official: "How can I, unless someone guides me?" Here in this place, gathered together, we guide one another. Amen.