



Sermon for Fifth Sunday of Easter, May 2021

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

Acts 8:26-40

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

Good morning, people of God. We are in the height of Spring, all around us! Thank you, God, for new life and renewing life! It's a beautiful thing in this northern hemisphere of our world to have the great 50 days of Easter, celebrating the conquering of death by our risen Savior, coincide with the time when the earth bursts again into bloom and new growth. Last week we focused on Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Today we focus on Jesus as the Vine.

I brought in these bean plants that we have been growing from seed indoors. We folks at St. Luke's who gather for worship in the Well and Jordan worship service at 9:15am took time back in the later season of Lent to plant seeds. There was the Sunday in Lent that we heard Jesus say, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." We decided we would take that Sunday to plant seeds together – whether in person or online. Before that Sunday, the Dolan family provided seeds and little potting pellets for every household, along with Deacon Glenda driving them around to deliver them to every household with children. Then, on that Sunday, the Dolan family guided us through steps for how to plant the bean seeds, and gave us steps for how to take care of the young plants and prepare them for planting outside as we watched them sprout even before Holy week and grow through Easter.

Look at them now! Already, mine are in flower. I have to curb my enthusiasm a bit. For these to bear fruit, really, they need some important next steps of care that might be called "tough love." I've begun, maybe late, hardening off the plants to get them ready for outdoors – it takes some time for plants raised indoors to strengthen themselves for the sun, wind, rain, and dryness of outdoor life. A little exposure at a time, more each day, gets them ready.

Today in John's Gospel we hear Jesus say, "I am the True Vine, and you are the branches." And we hear that wonderful Spirit-led moment of encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian – one of my absolute favorite stories from scripture.

So, let me lift up some key things for you from these two scriptures. These are the things we hear Christ saying to us and the Holy Spirit saying to us. These are words for us as disciples, as followers of Jesus. These are ways to live.

- ✦ Abide in me
- ✦ Get up and go
- ✦ Come alongside
- ✦ Love whom you meet
- ✦ Ask questions
- ✦ Let me lead
- ✦ Offer the story, speak the truth, proclaim the good news

Let's go through these again.

- ✦ Abide in me
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This gets at the heart of the Christian life.

So, Jesus invites us, directs us, urges us to abide in him. Jesus says, Abide 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.

What does it mean to abide?

The word is directly related to the word, abode, or the place one lives and comes to rest – one’s home. It means to make your home in that place – stable, steady, enduring as the place that is an anchor-point, a haven, a source of strength for your being. It also has come to mean the way we give ourselves to the place and people with which we have chosen and been given to dwell – to agree to live and act in accord with the others that share the house and govern the place. So, to abide means to dwell, hang around with, remain, tarry. It does not mean to bail out, walk out, exit, push off, or quit.

Abide with me, Jesus says – because if you are not connected, you will wither.

Abide with me. Jesus said this to his disciples who had been with him on the road, and they knew that Jesus was saying this not about a place but about a way of the heart and mind and spirit. In essence, Jesus promises that when you abide with him, you will not simply be still – but you **will** have a stilled centeredness in your being with Christ

Abide with me, says Jesus – and you will hear and sense tugs and prompts by the Holy Spirit, and so you will move – even to places and with people you would not have thought to connect with.

If we are abiding with Christ, if we are opening ourselves to God’s prompting and guidance, we can move quickly and energetically.

The Holy spirit says to Philip, “Get up and go.”

Get up and go. This is pretty straightforward, right? Now, some of you may be thinking, “What’s happened to my get up and go? I think it got up and went.” But really, this is what we can be ready to hear when we are abiding in Christ, with hearts attuned to hear. And we will from time to time sense a prompting, “Get up and go.” And the Holy Spirit is specific with Philip – “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” Have you ever felt pointed in a direction, and you don’t know quite why or what you’ll find? This is what it means to listen to a prompting – to move when you are stirred to move by the God who abides with you and to whom you are attuning yourself.

So Philip gets up and goes. And then he sees it – the chariot parked or just slowly poking along the wilderness road, carrying the Ethiopian eunuch official. And Philip hears the second prompting of the Holy Spirit: “Come alongside.”

Come alongside. When you see someone or some situation and sense the Lord compelling you, come alongside. Don’t jump in immediately to lead. Don’t follow vaguely in the background. Don’t stand back and merely observe. Come alongside. It means, accompany this person or these people. Offer yourself as a companion for a time. It means, be in the mix with people. Let yourself get close enough that you begin to get familiar with each other, receive each other’s presence, and get to know each other a bit.

This is when doors open. Coming alongside, we see more and sense more of what is going on with someone, and we will get signs of how God is moving and stirring in them.

But this coming alongside and listening with holy curiosity comes from a deeper, more enduring call of Christ Jesus in whom we abide. The call is this: Love whom you meet.

Love whom you meet. Let your heart open wide to this other person, this other group of people. Let yourself watch and listen with the eyes and ears of love, like we watch our children, our parents, our beloved ones, our dear friends and teachers and students and comrades. Christ is present and the Holy Spirit is stirring in every person’s life, because every person is beloved – whether they know it or not. And most of us don’t know it! The curious, caring, wondering gaze of love is itself a profound gift.

And then, we will see. And we will catch a glimpse of God at work. And we will then have all we need to open inviting doors for someone. So, Philip asks a question: “Do you understand what you are reading?” He might have even begun with another question: “What is it you are reading?”

Ask questions. This seems to be the way of God with people through much of the ancient Hebrew scriptures, and the way of Jesus throughout the Gospels. God asks questions, and these questions prompt conversation and open doorways into others’ hearts and minds.

Ask questions. Questions show interest and signal that you are giving someone your attention and care. After Philip asks a question, the Ethiopian takes over directing the conversation with his own questions.

Which then brings us to the next key theme. Basically, the whole story of Philip meeting the Ethiopian is a brilliant moment of the Holy Spirit teaching Philip this: Let me lead.

Let me lead. This is what the Holy Spirit is saying to Philip. Let me lead you to have this amazing encounter. Let me lead you to see and to open doors and guide your response. And this is what the Holy Spirit is instructing Philip to allow the Ethiopian to do. Let the other person lead. Let the other person or people lead where things will unfold and doors will open. If we take this position, it will become clear to us how we are to move and speak and offer something.

Finally, after hearing that the Ethiopian is struggling to understand the meaning of what he is reading, and after hearing that it is the portion from Isaiah about the suffering servant – and hearing in the Ethiopian’s question a sense of how much this part of scripture has spoken to him and grabbed his imagination (and maybe how much he identifies with it), Philip speaks. He offers the story of Jesus, speaks the truth about Jesus, proclaims the good news of Jesus.

Offer the story, speak the truth, proclaim the good news. This will come to us as we abide in Christ and allow ourselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit, and as we open ourselves to come alongside and listen to others with holy curiosity.

It is all more than enough gift for the Ethiopian eunuch. He practically jumps from the chariot and drags Philip down to the water along the road asking to be baptized right there.

Who knows how far from Jerusalem this trip took Philip. It may have been almost all of the nearly 50 miles from Jerusalem to Gaza across barren stretches of land, ending nearly at the border of Egypt where the Ethiopian would continue his long journey back to Ethiopia. Who knows – it may have been when they reached the Mediterranean Sea that the Ethiopian said, “Here is water! What’s to prevent me from being baptized?” All along, Philip continues to allow himself to be guided by the Holy Spirit, and accepts God’s call to abide with the Ethiopian for a good long stretch of his journey. And then, following more prompting, he heads back north along roads near the coast.

Our journeys will take us on surprising paths as we abide with Christ. Christ is the vine. We are the branches. We are only fully alive and thriving when we are fully connected. Yes, there is uncomfortable pruning – just as for my seedlings and bean plants there is uncomfortable hardening off. But this is what helps us be our most fruitful.

Abide in me, says Jesus. Stay connected. Dwell with me and let me dwell with you. And you will see wonders and be stirred to get up and go along wonderful paths you never dreamed with people whose lives you may change, while will certainly also change your life.

This abiding is a great adventure! Be still, and know and love the God who invites you to dwell with him.