

Let Your Vineyard Be Fruitful

In the name of him in whom we abide and through whom we are called to bear much good fruit, dear friends in Christ: Speaking of fruit, you know if you've ever grown any, that some of it ripens early, well ahead of the greater part that is ready to harvest all at once at the peak of the season. And you know too that there's something special about that first truly ripe peach (or whatever it is). Besides being a luscious bite of a taste you haven't truly enjoyed in almost a year, it is the promise of many more like it to come – at least while the season lasts.

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus talks about his disciples bearing fruit for God's kingdom. And with that in mind we might think of Philipp, who is the principle human actor in today's reading from Acts, as a branch on the Vine of Christ that bore fruit quite early. He was way ahead of the rest when it came to seeing the big picture.

Shortly before his visible ascension into heaven, Jesus had instructed his apostles to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all the things that Jesus had taught them. His instructions were clear; but the disciples heard them with Jewish ears. And the Jews had a long history of keeping themselves apart from other peoples of the world. To be sure, a lot of the Old Testament regulations handed down by the Lord to Moses at Sinai about what to wear, how to worship, and what you could and couldn't eat were given for that very purpose: to keep his chosen people separate and apart from the other nations. And this for two reasons: first, because he didn't want them mixing and intermarrying with idol worshippers for he knew that would lead his people to adopt their pagan practices; and secondly because he wanted to preserve the ancestral line that started with Abraham and led to the birth of Christ.

The apostles understood that the Law of Moses called Jews to be separate. They'd lived that way all their lives. It was ingrained in them. And so when Jesus told them to go into all the world to make disciples, they naturally assumed that meant taking the Gospel message only to Jews who happened to be living among the nations. Most major cities throughout the Mediterranean world and Western Asia had Jewish communities within them. They were traders and merchants who conducted business with their pagan neighbors, but they kept themselves apart socially and religiously. It was obvious to the apostles that these were the people who needed to hear about Jesus and his Gospel of salvation. That's who Jesus came to save: God's chosen people Israel, and nobody else.

Of course, Jesus had taught something quite different. In one parable he told of a king who put on a lavish wedding feast for his son. When everything was ready, he sent his servants to call those who had been invited. But they all declined to come. They had other things to do, and rudely spurned the king's gracious invitation. So the king said, "Fine, if they won't come, I'll invite others." So he sent his servants to gather everyone they could find in the highways and byways. No one was to be excluded. The king wanted the wedding hall filled with guests. He wanted everyone to honor his son.

The parable is about how God's chosen people – the ones who were originally invited – largely rejected Jesus and his Gospel. They refused to come to God's great wedding feast held in honor of his Son. So he sent the invitation instead to the Gentiles, that is, to non-Jews. They

would make up the majority of the guests within the kingdom of God. That's what the parable means; but unfortunately the apostles of Jesus hadn't quite figured it out yet.

Philipp did. And what's remarkable about it is that he wasn't one of the twelve apostles. He was instead one of the seven deacons chosen to help oversee the distribution of the Jerusalem church's charitable donations to the poor and needy. In today's terms he was a layperson, not a pastor. But he saw the bigger picture. And so, in the wake of the persecution that came upon the Jerusalem church after the stoning of St. Stephen, Philipp found himself taking refuge in one of the cities of the Samaritans. It was only natural for him to share with them the Good News about Jesus. Many heard him, became believers, and Philipp baptized them. The Samaritan church was born.

But when the apostles in Jerusalem heard about it, they about flipped their lids. Jesus is for Jews, not Samaritans. Jews hate Samaritans. They're the worst: a mongrel race; the descendants of unfaithful Israelites who intermarried with idol worshipping pagans centuries ago. Their religious views are equally mixed up: a blend of Moses and pagan mythology. What is Philipp thinking sharing Jesus with disgusting low lives like them?

They send Peter and John to investigate – and presumably to shut it down. We can't have Samaritans in the Church of Jesus Christ. It's just wrong. Ah, but when Peter and John arrive, they witness a visible outpouring of the Holy Spirit similar to the one they experienced themselves on the Day of Pentecost. But this time it's Samaritans receiving the Spirit, prophesying, and speaking in other languages. The two apostles are flabbergasted. Could it be that the Lord is so gracious to allow even Samaritans to have saving faith in Jesus? They can't deny the evidence right before them. Likely, however, they explain it by thinking that yes, Samaritans do have some Israelite blood coursing through their veins, so, they're kind of like distant relatives of us Jews. But they still don't see what Philipp does.

That's why today's lesson about the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch is so instructive. Under the orders of an angel and the Holy Spirit, Philipp goes all the way. He shares the Gospel of Jesus Christ with a man who from a Jewish perspective is as far from God and the light of his salvation as a person could possibly be. Consider the differences in the two men. Philipp, the Jew, is an average working guy. The Ethiopian is a very high government official. He's also quite wealthy. That he has an Isaiah scroll which he must have purchased in Jerusalem proves it. They were quite expensive; in today's terms you'd be talking multiple tens of thousands of dollars. Note that he isn't walking as he travels either. He's got someone else driving a chariot for him while he sits and reads – a chariot roomy enough to take on another passenger. It's the ancient world's version of a stretch limousine. He's traveling in style.

Culturally and in terms of native language, the two men are also worlds apart. And the difference in their skin tone is literally black and white. The one thing they share in common is a faith in the One True God. We're told the Ethiopian is on his way home, returning from having worshipped in Jerusalem. It means that he was a proselyte to the Jewish faith. How or where that happened is unclear, whether he became a believer already in his native country or perhaps while in Jerusalem on official business for his queen. But even in this there's a distance between Philipp and the Ethiopian. The former worshipped at the Temple on the court of Jewish men. It was a favored place. It's where a lot of the teaching went on. Only the priests and Levites stood closer to the Lord. The Ethiopian could not have gotten any closer than the outermost court – the one assigned to Gentiles; the same court on which the moneychangers and merchants who sold sacrificial animals were allowed to operate. It would have been like worshipping in a noisy, smelly zoo.

One more thing made the Ethiopian an outsider: the fact that he was a eunuch. It was common practice in the ancient world for government functionaries who worked in close proximity to members of the royal family to be emasculated. It was a way to preclude “cross pollination” and thus preserve and guarantee the purity of the royal bloodline. But in the Law of Moses, being a eunuch put a man at a disadvantage in the worshipping community. For a priest to perform his duties in the Temple or for a Jewish man to go onto the court assigned to them, they had to be intact, so to speak. If they weren’t due to deliberate “surgery” or accidental injury, they were disqualified. In this sense, then, the Ethiopian is doubly an outsider.

And that is no doubt why the Holy Spirit directs Philipp to approach him as he rides along in his chariot. Philipp is the right man for the job and the Lord wishes to make the point that no one however distant they may seem to be is excluded from God’s kingdom through faith in Jesus.

Philipp doesn’t need to be told twice. He runs over to the chariot and hears the Ethiopian man reading aloud from the prophet Isaiah. That Philipp immediately recognizes what he’s hearing speaks well of his familiarity with Scripture. There’s a lesson here for all of us. I mean, if you heard someone randomly reading from the Bible, could you name the book the passage came from?

As it turns out, the Ethiopian is reading part of what’s called the Fourth Servant Song of Isaiah. We typically use it as the Old Testament lesson on Good Friday because it speaks of the suffering, death for sin, and resurrection of Jesus the Savior. “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.”

Philipp asks him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And here the Ethiopian is a model for all of us in his humility. He asks, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” He admits that he needs a teacher. Indeed, at this point so do even the apostles who haven’t yet fully grasped the fullness of Jesus’ teaching. In this Philipp will become their teacher. The point to be made is that no one is so far along in biblical knowledge and Christian faith that they can’t benefit by instruction. But for this Ethiopian, it’s more than that. He hasn’t got the key to Holy Scriptures – the truth that it is all about God’s plan of salvation in Christ Jesus his Son. He invites Philipp to join him in the chariot.

Regarding the passage he just read, he asks Philipp, “Tell me, about whom does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” It’s a beautiful opening, as I said, because the passage so clearly foretells the death and resurrection of Jesus, and how his life was given as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. Philipp explains it all, and relates how it was all fulfilled by Jesus Christ. We are not given all the details, but note how quickly the conversation turns to Baptism. You can picture the Ethiopian hanging on Philipp’s words, and saying aloud, “This is wonderful news! How does one become a part of it?” And Philipp replying, “The Lord Jesus told us to make disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching.” “Baptism? What’s that?” And again, Philipp explains.

Suddenly the Ethiopian looks up and sees they’re passing by stream. He exclaims, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” It’s a good question. Any one of the apostles would have given him a long list: you’re a Gentile, a foreigner, your skin is black, and you’re a eunuch. No baptism for you. But Philipp was one of the first to see beyond all those

imagined barriers. He goes with the Ethiopian down into the water; two men worlds apart culturally, socially, racially, linguistically, you name it. They have almost nothing in common. They come up out of the water full brothers in Christ Jesus and heirs of the same salvation.

And then they part company likely never to see each other again in this life. But they remain united forever as brothers in Christ. Philipp, for his part, is taken by the Spirit to Azotus, a city populated by the descendants of Israel's ancient enemies the Philistines. There he continues his evangelistic outreach to those the apostles would have considered beyond redemption. And the Ethiopian continues on his way rejoicing in his new faith in Jesus the Savior. He too becomes an evangelist to his people. As a matter of fact, the Ethiopian Coptic Church traces its origin to this man. It shows some of the Lord's sense of irony in making this man who was incapable of fathering children by nature the spiritual father of an entire nation.

So, as noted at the outset, Philipp the Deacon was a branch on the Vine of Christ that bore early fruit for the kingdom. Eventually the rest of the apostles would come on board. Their eyes would be opened too. And the Apostle Paul, the former Pharisee and persecutor of the Church, would become the Lord's great evangelist to the Gentiles. He began what might be thought of as the main harvest in its season. It's a harvest that continues even today, and we a part of it.

We are also the Lord's servants in this harvest as the work to reach the lost with the message of Jesus' Gospel goes on. May we, like Philipp, be quick to see beyond all perceived barriers of race, language, culture, social class, level of education, mental ability, immoral or criminal history, or whatever else there might be. The harvest is plentiful. The laborers are few. May the Lord in his mercy use us. And let this be our constant prayer: Let your vineyard be fruitful, Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!