

## Reflection on the Word: April 29, 2018 - 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter

### Acts 8:26-38; 1 John 4:7-12; John 15:1-8

There are moments in life which remind us in a real way of how connected we are ... as people, as Canadians, as community both large and small. Following on the tragedy of the Humboldt Broncos a few weeks ago, this past week we mourned, with the people of Toronto, an act of violence by a driver as he deliberately plowed his white Ryder rental van into innocent pedestrians walking along a stretch of sidewalk at lunch hour on a sunny afternoon. Ten people were killed and 15 injured and we watched with dismay in the aftermath, as our television and computer screens connected us to the horrific event.

Because of media connections, we witnessed a historic meeting of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and South Korean President Moon Jae-in; we smiled with British royal watchers as the Duke & Duchess of Cambridge left the hospital with their third child, Prince Louis. We certainly live in a world where being connected takes on a whole new meaning.

But while the use of the internet and social media forms of connecting have grown exponentially, we all know that in many other ways, we as a people are becoming more and more disconnected ... meaningful conversations have given way to electronic texts and tweets; genuine care for the other decreases as individualism grows and healthy relationships suffer.

The story we heard earlier about Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is one which helps us to reflect on how willing we are to connect with the outsider, the stranger ... to think about, in our church or in our own personal lives, who is in and who is out?

An angelic call comes to Philip to head out along a road he would not normally travel ... a desert road, a kind of back way, that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza. It's not the road that most would travel; it was used mainly by outsiders and foreigners. I can imagine there would have been lots of questions on Philip's mind ... like, what was his mission to be? What was it God had in store for him?

A chariot approaches, and Philip has this inner urging, this voice telling him to go over to it. He hears the passenger reading aloud, as was the custom of that time; but he is astonished to discover that the man is reading from the Hebrew scriptures. We are told the man was a high court official of Candace, the queen of Ethiopia. But he was also a eunuch – one who has been castrated for the purpose of trusted servitude in a royal household. He was in Israel to worship the Lord at the temple, which means he was probably a Jewish proselyte ... one who was in the process of converting to the Jewish faith.

As Philip approaches his carriage, he says to the eunuch, "Do you know what it is you read?" And the answer comes back, "How can I, unless someone guides

me?" And then the meaningful connection happens. Philip begins to explain the scriptures in light of the good news of Jesus' life and the gift of love that is offered to everyone. The Ethiopian, being amazed at all this, and convinced of its truth, asks Philip if he might be baptized. And without hesitation, sensing the Ethiopian's sincerity, they stop at a pool of water and Philip baptizes him.

It matters not to Philip that this man is black, foreign, or a eunuch (incomplete because of his castration, and unable to produce offspring, which was so important in those days). Philip does not concern himself with who can or cannot be included. The desire to be baptized and Philip's wish to share the good news story of Jesus and his love is all that matters.

Recall the Ethiopian's reply when Philip asks, "Do you understand?" "How can I?" he responds, "unless someone guides me?"

This is the lesson of the vine in today's gospel: No branch lives unless connected to the vine, which for us is Christ. The eunuch needed that instruction, that connection, that acceptance that Philip offered. And so it is, that when loved and welcomed by others, even strangers, the different ones, the less than perfect, know they have a chance and a place in the family of God.

In Ethiopia there is a Christian church that dates back to the very earliest of Christian times. Tradition has it that this church was founded by that same eunuch of Candace's court, the one who met and talked with Philip on the road between Gaza and Jerusalem. His conversion and baptism may have marked the beginning of a Christian church in that part of the world. And Philip, a true branch of the vine which is Christ, responding to God's call, was instrumental in growing the church.

He was a true evangelist, a word which comes from the Greek 'evangelion', meaning "good news". And all of us, as members of the church and followers of Christ, have as part of our call, the responsibility of sharing the gospel in word and deed, so that others can hear and see the good news of Jesus' love and grace in and through us.

There's a story which I told some years back, which speaks of the importance of loving and supporting one another. Madge had received a phone call from across the country that her brother and his wife and young child had all been killed in an automobile accident. Immediately she began making arrangements for herself, her husband and two boys to travel home. But her mind was so numbed by the magnitude of the accident, that she couldn't think. She seemed to be operating in a fog.

The doorbell rang. Her neighbor, a man named Emerson King, stood there. "I've come to clean your shoes," he said. For a moment it didn't register and Madge asked him to repeat himself. "I've come to clean your shoes."

And then he went on to explain that when his father died, he had a difficult time getting his 5 children's shoes cleaned for the funeral. So he had come to take that chore off her hands. "Give me all your shoes," he said, "not just your good shoes, but all your shoes."

The boys' shoes, Madge realized then, were muddy. She collected them, along with her husband's and her own. Emerson got a brush and a rag, and they located the shoe polish. He settled on the kitchen floor with some newspapers and worked away until he had all the shoes cleaned. He even scrubbed the soles, so they could be laid in the suitcase without getting the clothes dirty.

Emerson's presence on the kitchen floor, quietly and methodically doing this basic chore, humming a hymn or two, gave Madge the strength and serenity she needed to get her mind in order and do the things she had to do. Now, she says, whenever she hears of anyone who has a loss in the family, she doesn't say, "If there's anything I can do ...". She picks a specific thing and just does it, knowing that God is able to use our ordinary encounters, our little acts of kindness, for good in the life of another.

Today's scriptures are all about connection. Jesus says: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit ..." Philip, responding to God's call, connects with the Ethiopian eunuch and through the sharing of the word and baptism, brings him into the family and household of the Christian church. And in the litany, based on the 1<sup>st</sup> letter of John, there is that invitation to live in perfect love ... love that is God's gift to us, love that casts out all fear, that breaks down barriers, that nurtures, supports and grows the church.

Christianity has at its heart, two central focuses: staying connected with God and staying connected with our neighbor; and without either of these, we are not whole people. God is love, we are told, and when we love one another, God lives in us, enabling us to produce good fruits which are central to our mission of carrying out God's work in the world.

A timely phone call, a word of appreciation, a sympathetic hug, a listening ear ... This is the way the Kingdom of God works. Church growth comes through those who are in the business of living a life of faith ... through those who engage in the evangelism of loving example. Over and over again, it has been shown that it is in the small, unexpected, and often undramatic moments of our lives that the real work of God's kingdom is done. The example of our lives is the best evangelism tool we have.

God blesses the little, apparently insignificant acts we do or words we speak and turns them into acts and words of great consequence. I've often heard it said: "The real test of our religion is how faithful we are in the little things, in the small, unglamorous moments of the day when one of God's creatures needs something we can provide, whether it's warm welcome to the stranger, sharing words of faith with the inquisitive, an expression of caring to the sick, love and support to the grieving, or the simple act of cleaning someone's shoes.

"I am the vine," Jesus says. "You are the branches. Those who abide in me, and I in them bear much fruit."

May it be so with us. Amen.