

## Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, May 3, 2015:

### Acts 8:26-40

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.

Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."

The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the

eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing.

But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

### **John 15:1-8**

[Jesus said:] "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. I 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

Let us pray...Amen.

This morning's Gospel reading may be familiar to some of you. From it, we get the classic hymn, *Abide With Me*, and of course, this scripture is the inspiration for the worship banners that we have displayed today. Now, I will admit that I am a sucker for farming metaphors: vines, and branches, pruning and bearing fruit. And in a bit, we'll get to some of those metaphors.

But to start off, I'd like to explore this whole concept of *abiding*. If we think about it, who uses the word abide anymore? Oh, some of us might throw it into polite conversation here or there, but for the most part, the use of the word abide has faded from modern use.

Basic psychology tells us that a person thinks the way they speak. So language is thought. If you want to know how a person thinks, pay close attention to how they speak. And if most of us aren't using the word *abide* when we speak, it's a good bet that we aren't thinking about abiding, and an even better bet that we aren't actually doing any abiding!

But that's the beauty of scripture, it makes us think, and it reminds us of the things we can be doing to live out our faith lives.

So we are called to abide in Jesus. And he will abide in us. The Greek word we translate into abide means 'remain'. So we are to remain in Jesus, and he will remain in us. Which is interesting, because a person only remains somewhere if they have a choice to go somewhere else. We decide where we abide. We decide where we remain.

When we confirm our newest members, we hear their promises to abide in Jesus. When we receive new members from other faith communities, we hear their promises to abide in Jesus. But I'm not so sure abiding in Jesus is as easy or as simple as it sounds.

And with the obvious decline in overall Christian attendance in worship, and perhaps with the state of the world these days, fewer and fewer followers are choosing to abide in Jesus.

Jesus uses the vine and branch metaphor to describe the kind of relationship we would have if we abide in him. A branch abides in the vine, is connected to the vine in a vital and life-giving way. A branch cut off from the vine dies. A branch cut off from the vine can't bear fruit.

So what does a modern branch abiding in the vine look like? What does a modern Christian abiding in Jesus look like? It looks like a branch bearing fruit. They look like someone who feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, visits the sick, visits those in prison...

So how connected are you to the vine? How much do you abide in Jesus? What fruits do you see coming from the branch of your life? We each have different ways of connecting to the vine. We each have different ways of bearing fruit. And as long as we awaken each day, no matter how many days we've lived, no matter how many days we have left, we are called to abide in the vine, to abide in Jesus.

Reflecting on how we are connected can help us make good choices for future abiding....Reflecting on the fruits we bear can help us make good choices for future fruit bearing.

This essential metaphor, this basic way of describing our connection to our Lord and Savior, can be instrumental in helping us on our faith journeys. And the good news I've found in this metaphor comes from a more modern approach to growing vines: even when a branch has been cut off, we have learned to reattach that branch with careful grafting. We can now take a branch that has been completely removed from a vine, and attach it again so that it is healthy and able to bear fruit again.

What a miracle. What a relief. To know that if we get cut off from the vine, we can be grafted back on so that we can have purpose and meaning again, so that we can bear fruit again. Of course, we have to *want* to abide in the vine. We have to *want* to be grafted back on. We have to *want* to bear fruit, and have Jesus abide in us.

We have a choice about where we abide. Jesus wants us to choose him. And there is no question that there are many more choices about where to abide than there used to be. And there is no question that many are choosing to abide somewhere else. If we choose to abide in the vine, to abide in Jesus, we're probably going to stand out. Probably going to look differently than our neighbors and friends, probably feel differently than those around us.

If we choose to abide in Jesus, we're probably going to start feeling differently about those who are in need. Instead of fear, or anger, our connection to the vine will help us feel compassion.

This week, as we go about living our lives, maybe we could reflect on just where we've been abiding lately. Are we connected to the vine, or are we in need of a graft? Have we born fruit lately, or are our branches devoid of fruit? These are important questions to ask, especially as we have a choice: God's gift of free will means that we have to actually *choose* to abide in Jesus. It doesn't just happen as a matter of course.

A vine is planted with the intention of growing fruit. A farmer will recognize when a vine, or the branches of a vine no longer bear fruit, and will prune in order to stimulate more growth. Let me repeat that: a vine grower has to cut branches in order to bring about growth. The very act of cutting branches causes the vine to put out more branches, branches that will bear more fruit.

So that leaves us asking the question, if we want more growth in the church, or in our own lives, if we want more fruit to come from the vine, what do we need to cut? Where do we need to cut in order to stimulate new growth? It will be different for each of us, different for each church. But a careful and thoughtful pruning can often lead to an amazing burst of growth.

The last bit of good news I have for you today is this: we don't need to abide in the vine in order to assure ourselves of everlasting life. That's right, you heard me: Jesus says right up front that we have already been cleansed by the word he has spoken to us. So abiding in the vine isn't an act of soul preservation, because that's already ensured. Abiding in the vine is an act of growth, and an act of faith, and an act of love.

Each one of us is capable of bearing much fruit. As long as we abide in Jesus.

This week, and in the weeks to come, if you feel you have a choice about where you abide, I hope you will choose Jesus. Amen.