

Wesley United Methodist Church

Rev. Beverly E Stenmark

April 29, 2018

A Place to Call Home

Title: Always Room for One More

Scripture: Acts 8:26-40

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

Almost three hundred years ago, in 1727, 10 women boarded a ship in France for the long and dangerous trip to the settlement of New Orleans. They were nuns of the Order of St. Ursula. They were forced to leave in 2005, again by boat, as the floodwaters from Hurricane Katrina rose. They blew out the convent's perpetual candle and shut the door of the Ursuline Academy where they have taught all races and classes longer than any other all-girls school in the United States.ⁱ

They were gone for only three months. They are back now teaching and providing a home for girls. After returning, 83-year-old Sister Damian said, "our job now is to listen and help people get their lives back together." With 290 years of ministry in New Orleans, they know the people and places around them deeply, affectionately, and intimately – in the way today's scriptures suggest that God loves us all.

We heard that "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them." (1 John 4:16b) "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit." (John 15:5). In the case of the nuns of St. Ursula in New Orleans – 290 years of fruit. Think of the number of girls in New Orleans whose lives have been touched by the faithfulness and love of these nuns over the past 290 years.

When we stay connected to the vine – stay connected to Jesus – we bear fruit in ways we cannot imagine.

Philip was a follower of Jesus. He was one of seven men chosen to help take care of the poor in the early Christian church. He was likely chosen for this ministry because of his integrity but also because he spoke Greek. He became both a linguistic and cultural bridge for the Greek speaking believers. Unfortunately, things did not go well for the early church, the early followers of Jesus. What Jesus taught had threatened the status quo and there was a movement to stop his followers.

Stephen, one of the other seven men chosen with Philip to care for the poor had been killed and the church was being persecuted. Members were being arrested so many of the followers had left Jerusalem and were scattered in different places. Philip taught about Jesus wherever he went and found himself in Samaria – a place where Jews were not welcome. Jews and Samaritans did not associate with each other.

Philip was one of the branches that stayed connected to the vine – stayed connected to Jesus – even though Jesus was physically no longer with them, Philip remained faithful to what Jesus had taught, he remained open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Philip taught and shared the good news about Jesus with the Samaritans and many came to believe and were baptized. Philip connected to the vine was bearing fruit for Jesus in places that were unexpected.

In the reading we heard this morning from the Acts of the Apostles, Philip was told by an angel to take the road from Jerusalem to Gaza at noon. This was a desert road and noon was a time when most people tried not to be out in the hot sun. But Philip did as he believed God wanted him to do. Along the road, Philip encountered an Ethiopian eunuch. We heard about the encounter between them, how Philip helped the Eunuch

understand the scripture he was reading and how the eunuch then asked Philip about being baptized.

As 21st century people in a place like Lincoln, it is easy for us to underestimate the significance of this encounter. The eunuch – a castrated African male, trained to take sensitive positions not trusted to males, torn from his birth family and enslaved at a young age has no family of his own. In the eyes of the community he was considered neither male nor female. He was a Gentile. Most definitely an outsider, as far as Jews were concerned.

He was also a highly trusted official, responsible for the entire treasury in the court of Queen Candace of Ethiopia or possibly Nubia (modern Sudan). He had been in Jerusalem where he had come to worship in the temple although he would have been allowed only in the outer court.

Philip, the man who met him along the road was an apostle, a Jew, a Greek, a Middle Easterner and he had no access to the sort of money that the eunuch had. There couldn't be two more different men from an outside view. Yet, here is the eunuch reading the prophet Isaiah, scripture he cannot understand, hungering for a God he knows only vaguely and Philip a faithful follower of Jesus, ready and eager to share the good news with anyone he encounters. After their conversation, they come to water and the eunuch asks. "What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

The answer clearly is that there is nothing to prevent him from being baptized. "And the two men, one Ethiopian one Middle Eastern, one poor, one rich, one Gentile, one Jew, dive together, down into the water, for baptism."ⁱⁱ The Ethiopian Coptic Church traces its origins to this incident

which means that the eunuch must have gone back home and shared what had happened and what he had experienced.

Jason Byassee – a United Methodist pastor and theologian at Duke Divinity School reflected upon this encounter with these words, “What a glimpse of the church! The church isn’t just a place that does the sorts of things Jesus does. We don’t just admire Jesus, or even just worship him. We are joined to him, vine to branches. We are organically united, one to another, so that one can no longer be understood without the other. Here is the chief sign of that union – we love. We are commanded to, but we hardly need the command any more than a leaf needs to be told to belong to its branch. Love flows from the one to the other and back without deliberation.”ⁱⁱⁱ

These two stories, the nuns of St. Ursula in New Orleans teaching and providing housing for young girls, and Philip teaching first in Samaria and then teaching the Ethiopian eunuch in the desert are illustrations of the reality that there is always room for one more in the family of God, in the church of Jesus Christ. Both are great examples of being connected to the vine and bearing fruit. Both are great examples of loving one another as God has loved us.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if these two stories were the whole story? The reality is that those who claim to be Christian, those who profess to follow Jesus come not only in all shapes, sizes, colors, orientation, identification and are as diverse as our world – but they, we, also come in all different perspectives, understandings, and actions that are often very different from what we have heard in these two examples.

Sometimes it seems to me that we are reading very different Bibles or at the very least focusing on different parts of the Bible and seeing only

what we want to see, or what we have been taught to see. There is a song in the musical “South Pacific” that says, “You have to be taught before its too late, before you are six or seven or eight, to hate all the people your relatives hate, you have to be carefully taught.”

When I hear the great debates and vast gaps in what people who profess to be Christians proclaim I am reminded very strongly of how important it is for us to teach our children and each other a gospel of love, a message that is faithful to what Jesus taught. I understand again, how important it is to stay connected to the vine, if we are to bear fruit.

This week I came across something that you may have seen before, that reminds me that how we read words and how we look at them is important. There is a poem that has been circulating on FaceBook and in other places called “Refugees” by Brian Bilston. Please indulge me for a minute while I read it to you.

They have no need of our help
So do not tell me
These haggard faces could belong to you or me
Should life have dealt a different hand
We need to see them for who they really are
Chancers and scroungers
Layabouts and loungers
With bombs up their sleeves
Cut-throats and thieves
They are not
Welcome here
We should make them
Go back to where they came from
They cannot
Share our food
Share our homes
Share our countries
Instead let us
Build a wall to keep them out

It is not okay to say
These are people just like us
A place should only belong to those who are born there
Do not be so stupid to think that
The world can be looked at another way

When you get to the end of that poem, the next line says, “Now read from bottom to top.” Listen to what happens when we do that.

The world can be looked at another way
Do not be so stupid to think that
A place should only belong to those who are born there
These are people just like us
It is not okay to say
Let’s build a wall to keep them out
Instead let us
Share our countries,
Share our homes
Share our food
They cannot
Go back to where they came from
We should make them
Welcome here
They are not
Cut-throats and thieves
With bombs up their sleeves
Layabouts and loungers
Chancers and scroungers
We need to see them for who they really are
Should life have dealt a different hand
These haggard faces could belong to you or me
So do not tell me
They have no need of our help

The same words, read differently. Two very different perspectives. Both are perspectives loudly proclaimed by people who profess to be Christians. I agree with one and disagree strongly with the other. That can

probably be said for all of us – because the two viewpoints are vastly different.

In a world where such different perspectives exist among those who claim to be followers of Jesus, we are each responsible for living our lives in ways that are consistent with the teachings of Jesus, ways that witness to the reality that we are branches that are part of the vine. We are branches that are called to bear fruit.

It might be helpful for us to remember that the unproductive branches are not outsiders who have nothing to do with the community. They are persons in the community who do not bear fruit in love. Branches in a vine do not and cannot stand on their own.

We are not a group of free-standing individuals but rather branches that circle and support each other. Our fruitfulness depends not on our own efforts, but on the nurture provided by the vine. As a community of faith, we are called to work together in love. The mark of a faithful community is not who its members are, but how it loves.^{iv}

Because of God's love, Christians are called to live in new ways. Because God loves us, we are called to love one another, not just the people who are easy to love. As I read Scripture, it seems to me that the character of God's love is to bring hope to the world. Throughout scripture, I see love for God and love for neighbor to be bound together. Our scripture today asks, "How can we love God whom we have not seen if we do not love our brothers and sisters whom we have seen?"

Philip crossed cultural boundaries when he taught the Samaritans. He crossed many boundaries when he taught the eunuch on the desert road and when he went with him into the water so that he could be baptized. The early church struggled with the on-going question about how

and with whom they should form community. John's Gospel and the Letter provide guidance if we are willing to hear and to understand. Jesus emphasizes the importance of remaining connected to him.

It is God who defines love – not the other way around. God's love is revealed to us in Jesus. The heart of God is for people of every nation on this earth. God is the creator of nations and God desires that the nations rejoice and worship God. In the Scripture we see story after story of God using God's people to cross cultural and other boundaries to bring God's blessing to the ends of the earth.

The good news of Jesus' death and resurrection occurred in Jerusalem, but through Philip and the faithfulness of Jesus' followers, the good news was soon on its way throughout Samaria, on its way to Ethiopia, and to all the nations of the world. We are called to be part of that continued spreading of the word, the spreading of God's love to all people, because of God's love for us. We are called to proclaim and to live the witness that there is always room for one more in the house of God.

Karen Munson, one of my colleagues reflecting upon this week's scripture wrote, that this is a story of "Deep hospitality in which one man overflowing with Christ's love boldly shares it with another man who has seen a sign and is hungry to be fed, both interrupting what they were doing so that they could make the most of a moment God provided. May (we) know that same holy boldness as (we) invite each other to share the journey."^v

ⁱ Roth, Robert, "Divine Intimacy" in Preaching the Word, for April 29, 2018

ⁱⁱ Byassee, Jason, "Joined As One" in Preaching the Word, for April 29, 2018

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Keeping Holy Time, Year B, commentary on John 15:1-8, pp. 179-180

^v Munson, Karen. Mid Maine Reflection for week April 26, 2018.