

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church

Even More Fruitful

Acts 8:26-40

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and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
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Who can speak of his descendants?
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³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

³⁶ As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" ³⁷ ³⁸ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

You may have noticed how all the First Lessons during the Easter season are from the Book of Acts. Their purpose is to show how the resurrection of Jesus shaped the early Christian church. The hope is it will shape us in similar ways.

To fully appreciate what we heard in today's Lesson from Acts chapter 8, we need to back up to the story's beginning in Acts 6 where seven men are introduced – Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas. They had been chosen by their fellow members to be responsible for the day to day affairs of the church, especially the distribution of food to the congregation's widows.

It is worth noting that none of them were Apostles. And given their Greek names; none of them were connected to prominent Jerusalem families, none of them had renowned rabbis as fathers; and one of them, Nicolas, was Greek by birth but had converted to Judaism as an adult. Yet all of them were "known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" (Ac 6:3).

Five of them are never mentioned again. We don't know what happened to them, other than the risen Christ continued to shape his church by what they did while in office. Acts 6:7 says, "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith."

The two that are mentioned again are Stephen, whose story is told in great detail right after the verse I just read, right up to the day an enraged mob drags him out of the city and stones him to death, and Philip. His story picks up immediately where Stephen's ends. "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria ... Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed Christ there" (8:1,4-5). So many Samaritans were converting to Christianity and with such great joy that the Apostles Peter and John came from Jerusalem to help their displaced lay leader Philip in the harvest of this ripe mission field.

But this is when God suddenly directs Philip away from the scores of receptive Samaritans to find just one Ethiopian headed in the opposite direction on a road in the middle of nowhere. Then, as you heard, once the man is brought to faith, Philip is suddenly taken not back to Samaria but to another unlikely place where he becomes something of a wandering preacher until he reaches Caesarea and is not heard from again for another thirty years.

Today, instead of a great persecution, a great pandemic has broken out. And while the virus is not explicitly against the church like the persecution did of Stephen and Philip's day was, its effects are similar. Last year worshippers were told to flee for their lives and their neighbors' lives to the safe quarantines of their homes. As a result, church sanctuaries and classrooms, fellowship halls and narthexes around the world emptied out. Some remain empty to this day in this community. Others, like ours, that have reopened, still don't know for sure how long the road back to normal is. Yes, it is true that livestream technology and Zoom meetings have enabled the church to keep proclaiming Christ wherever the flock has scattered, but the numbers don't lie: in-person attendance has not recovered and online views are declining deteriorated the months go by. You don't need an apostle's help to realize that the earthly condition of the church has taken a hit.

But what about its spiritual condition?

Before we form our own opinion about what is happening, we might want to take into consideration what Jesus said in today's Holy Gospel. Remember? He is the vine ... and we are the branches ... and his Father is the gardener who prunes them ... cutting off unfruitful ones and cleaning up fruitful ones so that they can be "even more fruitful" (Jn 15:2) than they were before.

Like what happened to the church in Acts. Persecution no doubt did thin out some of its branches and did cut back its numerical growth. But for those whose connection to Christ was strong – think Philip and Stephen and the others "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" from their love for and knowledge of the Scriptures – they ended up becoming "even more fruitful" (Jn 15:2) branches as refugee missionaries than they would have if they had been able to keep living their lives in Jerusalem as they always had.

Could that explain some of what's going on? Yes, some will forsake the faith ... and that's never good. But there have also been even more fruit too. The terrific offerings during the pandemic are but one example. So who knows what God is doing? But what is certain is that Jesus is still the vine and the faithful are the branches connected to him through their use of and love for his Word and Sacraments. It's also certain that the heavenly Father has always looked for the fruits of faith in those who confess Christ, so much so that he prunes and tends his vineyard all with the goal of making his people "even more fruitful" (Jn 15:2) even now.

But lest we think merely grasping this possibility is the point, there is the Ethiopian, that lone individual headed in the wrong direction. All the man needed was someone who could answer his question with the Bible's good news about Jesus. And that's exactly what God made sure he got that day from Philip.

In pandemic or persecution, good times or bad, who knows to what use God may put the Word that you have come to know and love! Chances are it will involve a lone individual – a family member or friend or perfect stranger – that's headed away from heaven. God is arranging things in this big world and in your own life all so that you can answer that person's questions in due season with hope and joy that is yours in Christ.

One more thing. Expect doing so will take you out of your comfort zone or even worse. Philip, you remember, was on the run from persecution when he preached to the Samaritans and had to leave what seemed like a perfect situation just to speak to one Ethiopian. You and I, on the other hand, might have to put on a mask or take one off. We might get cancelled. Might have to answer the questions of someone holding radically different views than you hold. Might have to drop what you are doing. Might have to reach out to those people at church you haven't seen since last March. I don't know. But what I do know is that God intends it to make you "even more fruitful" (Jn 15:2) as you do, just like he did Philip.

Amen.

Prayer of the Church

M: Heavenly Father, you have grafted us onto the vine of your Son. Prune us and cut off from us all sin and dead works, that we may always draw life from Christ our Savior and produce even more fruit.

Father and Teacher of all truth, on this Confirmation Weekend we ask you to keep connected to Christ by his Word our 8th grade confirmands:

Andrew Alexander
Jake Bareno
Andrew Becker
Sage Brownell
Gideon Hahm
Sierra Kareus
Lucas Lamborne
Dalton Lewkowski
Markayla Schuiling
Anderson Stoner
Austin Van Norwick

Almighty God, give health and guidance to our elected leaders and all in authority, that they may serve honorably and in accord with your good order. Look favorably on our land and all those who live here, for we depend on you for all good things.

[Merciful God, you hear and answer your children in their hour of need. *[Give aid to _____.]* Grant that they would bear their crosses with faith, ever looking to you, and so fix their hearts where true joy is found.]

Heavenly Father, you are gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Hear and answer our prayers for the sake of Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Lord's Prayer

C: **Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.**

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John 15:1-8

¹⁵ “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes^[a] so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵ “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

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