

Creepy: The Vine and the Eunuch

Acts 8:26-40, John 15:1-8

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Sing: Christ Jesus tells us he's the vine
And branches all are we
We must stay connected to the vine
To be who we're made to be.

I told my dad, a retired pastor, that I was preaching on the "I am the vine and you are the branches" passage this week, and he looked at me with a twinkle in his eye and said "creepy."

I just looked at him blankly and finally said, "I don't get it."

He leaned forward in the porch chair, waiting for me to catch up to him.

My scuppernong vines are some of my prized plants. They began as small vines nearly a decade ago their branches have spread along the fence, stretching and crawling. I often have to pull them out of other bushes, or the River Birch at the end of the fence, because they wrap their tendrils around whatever they encounter and pull themselves along.

Still I stared at him.

He finally relented. "Creepy. Vines. They creep."

Ahh yes. They creep. They seem to find their way into the most inhospitable surfaces, making a connection, continuing to move and grow, never staying put in the place on the fence where I would like them to stay. They cannot be contained.

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This passage in John provides several poignant images for understanding who we are as a people of God who abide in Jesus. We have to grapple with what it might mean to prune branches that bear no fruit. We consider what it means for the branch to abide in the vine. We question where we are in this passage. In this passage WE are not the garden keepers-Jesus describes God in that way - as the vinegrower. The blooming and bearing fruit, the health and productivity of the branches are not dependent on our gardening or governance, and certainly not on our efforts to contain and control.

The instruction given to us - to you and to me - is to abide. "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit."

It reminds me of the Mary and Martha story in the gospel of Luke - where Jesus instructs the busy Martha to be more like Mary, who was resting in his presence. But this passage about the vine sounds a little different to me. It's not so much about resting as much as it is about our source, our lifeforce, our power, our way of being in the world, and also what our work is.

It's about our living, and moving, and having our very being as people rooted, no, fully a part of, fully abiding in, the ungovernable, uncontainable, Holy.

The ungovernable, uncontainable Holy that reached the Ethiopian Eunuch in the Acts passage today.

This story in Acts is full of adventure and mystery. My husband said it is one of his favorite stories for that reason. Indeed, as it is told, Phillip operates to an entirely different location when this bit is over. He vanishes. He's here and then he's...elsewhere.

This is a story that I first learned in children's Sunday School and it's been a part of my holy imagining for most of my life, but I was nevertheless surprised at what it holds for us today on this CELEBRATION Sunday. I kept picking apart details of the telling and found that each one animates our imagining of a life together, abiding in the Holy.

First of all, just so you know, this Ethiopia was not the same Ethiopia that we know today. This has no bearing on our understanding of this story - I just think it is interesting. It was located in the region that is now Sudan. I hope that helps you win Bible Trivia one day.

But what IS important is that the culture associated with this Ethiopia was described by the ancients with much intrigue. Pliny the Elder speaks of descriptions characterized as "human monstrosities" - people without noses, upper lips, or tongues, people who followed a dog as their king. These stereotypes were well known to those hearing this story in Acts - so this story then, of inviting an Ethiopian into God's community, was radically provocative.

And then, this Ethiopian was a eunuch. His body had been altered to ensure his service and loyalty as a government official. And the Torah explicitly states that men who have been altered in this way cannot enter, are not welcome in, the assembly of the Lord. But the prophecy of Isaiah says that eunuch and foreigners will be welcomed into God's house.

And what was this Ethiopian eunuch reading in his chariot? Yes. Isaiah. He is reading a portion that describes the suffering servant, understood to be Jesus the Christ. And he is reading from a portion of the text that comes just before this bit about Eunuchs and foreigners being welcome.

And significantly, he asks for help understanding what he is reading.

He is not equipped to fully understand, even though he is a learned official used to governing things. He asks someone to teach him - and sometimes I feel like that might be the biggest miracle in this passage. That someone who is used to knowing things was willing to be taught.

But let us not miss all of the movements of the Spirit.

Phillip had been chased out of Jerusalem, the institutional church of all institutional churches.

The non-Jewish Eunuch was allowed to come close enough to worship, to pay homage, but would have been kept at a distance, kept on the fringes. ‘

A holy nudging sends Phillip down a deserted road and directly to this outsider. The man asks for help understanding and Phillip is able to teach him. They come across water for Baptism out in the wilderness. And then the Spirit moves Phillip on to other locations. Literally moves him.

On this Celebration Sunday as we reflect on our fellowship together, and on covenanting together with newcomers (and oldcomers), we are called to remember in whom and what we abide. We reflect on our living, and moving, and having our very being as people rooted, no, fully a part of, fully abiding in, the ungovernable, uncontainable, Holy.

When we abide in Jesus, when we are open to the movement of the Spirit, our work will be about welcome and teaching, about moving outside of the comfort of our institutions or our inner sanctums, it will be about blooming and growing, participating in the creeping of the Holy outside of the strictures and structures that make us comfortable.

We covenant together in our abiding.

Family of God, you are invited to abide in the suffering servant, in our redeemer, in the one who changed everything, so that you might not wither, so that you will thrive as one, animated by the Spirit, who carries the peace of Christ, the deep and abiding love of God into all the world. You are invited to grow and stretch and bloom in messy ways that overrun your containers.

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