**Weekend of Sunday, April 28, 2024**

**Fifth Sunday of Easter/Lectionary X/Year B**

**First Reading: Acts 8:26-40**

**Second Reading: 1 John 4:7-21**

**Processional Gospel Reading: John 15:1-8**

**Sermon Title: *“Abiding in Christ & Bearing Fruit for God”***

**Theme**

*This Sunday’s image of how the risen Christ shares his life with us is the image of the vine. Christ the vine and we the branches are alive in each other, in the mystery of mutual abiding described in the Gospel and the First Letter of John. Baptism makes us a part of Christ’s living and life-giving self and makes us alive with Christ’s life. As the vine brings food to the branches, Christ feeds us at his table. We are sent out to bear fruit for the life of the world.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Acts 8:26-40**

26An 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.) 27So 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 28and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” 30So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” 31He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 32Now 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.
 33In his humiliation justice was denied him.
  Who can describe his generation?
   For his life is taken away from the earth.”
34The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” 35Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 36As 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?” 38He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 39When 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. 40But 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.

**Second Reading: 1 John 4:7-21**

7Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.
 13By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.
  God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 17Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19We love because he first loved us. 20Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

**Gospel: John 15:1-8**

 [Jesus said:] 1“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4Abide 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. 5I 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. 6Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

**Sermon**

Brothers and sisters of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, as we gather together on this Fifth Sunday of Easter, our hearts and minds are drawn to the profound message of hope and renewal found in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Easter season reminds us of the transformative power of Christ’s love and the invitation He extends to each one of us to *abide* in Him, a concept that he introduces today and continues through next weekend, and the natural result of that abiding in Him, which is bearing fruit for God. Today, we delve into the Scriptures to explore the significance of abiding in Christ, the essence of divine love, and the call to share the Good News with the world.

*But before we begin, I have an Easter interruption for you. What is the best way to make Easter easier? Put an "i" where the "t" is.*

Easter ~ Easier

Let us begin our journey by turning to the Gospel of John, chapter 15, where Jesus speaks to His disciples using the analogy of the vine and branches.

In these verses, Jesus declares Himself as the true vine, and His Father as the vinegrower. *(Don’t read the following:)*

1“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.

The English Standard Version exchanges the noun, “vinegrower” for “vinedresser” and I like that better. I will come back to the Father as the vinedresser in a moment.

Returning to Jesus as the “true vine,” just as branches draw their sustenance and life from the vine, so are we called to remain in intimate communion with Christ, allowing His life-giving presence to flow through us. It is through this connection that we bear fruit—fruit that glorifies God and testifies to His transforming work in our lives.

Jesus also says that His Father is the vinegrower, in as much as we are the creation of the Father, and I posit that His Father is also the “vinedresser,” because in verse two Jesus says,

2He [His Father, the vinedresser] removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

We like the part about us being a branch attached to Jesus the vine. But we are not fond of this part, the part about the possibility of being pruned from the vine.

You probably are not aware of it, but two falls ago, I spent many hours pruning the crimson maples in the east parking lot. There was a lot of dead wood in them and they looked terrible. Personally, I think that they are planted in too small of a bed and they are starving for water and nourishment – but what do I know? However, I want you to notice that by pruning the trees back and removing the dead wood, the trees have fewer branches to feed and therefore, I think they look healthier.

Jesus says that His Father, the vinedresser, removes every branch that bears no fruit. Do you identify as a fruitless branch? And while we may not like the idea of being pruned, when the Father prunes the fruitless branches, the branches that bear fruit bear even more fruit.

Allow me to explain. I think that it is safe to say that we all consider ourselves branches connected to Jesus. However, we also probably all have activities, hobbies, and habits that hinder us from producing fruit at all, or as much fruit as we can – fruit being the advancement of the Kingdom of God. If we are blessed, the Father will prune those activities, hobbies, and habits that do not produce, out of our lives so that our lives can produce more fruit.

“But I don’t wanna be pruned!” you say. Jesus says that the alternative is to be

6bgathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

Now what is your choice?

Furthermore, Jesus makes it clear that apart from Him, we can do nothing. Our efforts to produce fruit in our own strength will ultimately be futile. Only by *abiding* in Christ and relying on His power can we bear fruit that endures.

Jesus emphasizes the necessity of *abiding* in Him for spiritual vitality and fruitfulness. You will hear me repeat this next weekend, and that is that Jesus uses the word *abide* eleven times in chapter fifteen; eight times in today’s Gospel Reading. Do you think that *abiding* is an important concept to Jesus?

Jesus defines what he means *to abide* pretty succinctly when he uses the imagery of the vine and branches to illustrate the relationship between himself and his disciples.

4Abide 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.

Jesus continues by painting a vivid picture of the vital relationship between Himself and His disciples, likening them to branches that must remain connected to Him to bear fruit. Jesus states,

5I 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.

When we call ourselves Jesus’s disciples and we call him Lord, then we necessarily have to pay attention to what he commands us to do. And here he says pretty clearly, that our role as His disciples is to “bear much fruit.”

*Before we move on to the Second Reading, I have another Easter interruption for you. Presuming you have eaten all your Easter candy, what do you do now? Eggs-ercise!*

Turning our attention to First John, we find a profound exposition on the nature and expression of divine love. John writes,

7Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.

Here, John reveals that love originates from God Himself and is a defining characteristic of those who belong to Him. As recipients of God's love, we are called to reflect that love to others, both within the community of believers and beyond. How ya doing with that?

John goes on to declare,

10In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

If you are not familiar with the verb, *atone*, it means “to make amends**:** to provide or serve as reparation or compensation for something bad or unwelcome.” Well, our sin and resultant punishment of death is certainly something bad or unwelcome that we can do nothing about.

Thank God for God revealed in Jesus Christ. The ultimate expression of God's love is seen in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross, where He *atoned* for our sins and reconciled us to God. When we were lost to sin, God could not bear to look at us. But because of the *atonement*, Jesus’s *atoning* death on the cross, we have been made righteous, and God can now look at us with all the love of a Father.

As recipients of such lavish love, we are compelled to love one another. John reminds us,

11Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

Furthermore, our love for others is not based on their merit or deservingness but flows from the abundance of God's love poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, so says Paul in Romans chapter 5.

*And one final Easter interruption for you before we conclude with the First Reading from Acts. What kind of jewelry makes the best Easter gift? Anything made out of 14-carrot gold.*

In our First Reading from Acts, we hear the fascinating account of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian official. As Philip *obediently* follows the leading of the Holy Spirit, he meets the official who is reading from the book of Isaiah but does not understand its meaning.

Philip seizes the opportunity to explain the scriptures to the official, starting from the passage he was reading and proclaiming to him that the suffering servant told of in the prophecy of Isaiah is none other than Jesus. Philip told the official more about Jesus and as they travel along the road, they come to some water, and the official expresses his desire to be baptized as Jesus commanded. Philip obediently baptizes him, and the official breaks into spontaneous rejoicing, as he experiences the transformative power of the gospel firsthand.

This narrative illustrates the importance of sharing the message of salvation with others and the role of every disciple in proclaiming the Good News. Philip's obedience to the prompting of the Holy Spirit resulted in the salvation of the Ethiopian official and the potential to spread of the gospel to distant lands. This is what can happen when disciples are obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

As we reflect on these passages during this Easter season, may we be reminded of our calling:

* to abide in Christ,
* to bear fruit that glorifies God,
* and to love one another with the same selfless love that God has lavished upon us.

May we be empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Good News boldly, sharing the message of salvation with a world in need of hope and redemption.

As we go forth from this place into the mission field of our communities and neighborhoods, maybe even our families, let us abide in the love of Christ, drawing our strength and sustenance from Him alone.

May our lives be characterized by the fruit of the Spirit; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23), bearing witness to the transformative power of our risen Lord in our lives.

**Prayer**

O God, how intense your love for us must be, that you were willing to go to such extreme lengths to save us from ourselves. We give you thanks for Jesus Christ our Lord and his atoning sacrifice that allows us to be you beloved children. Prune that which prevents us from prospering your Kingdom, and inspire us to live the gospel wherever we are. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen