

Sermon Easter 5b 2018: Abiding to Become Evangelists

Introduction: A Challenge Beyond Our Current Capabilities

When I first saw the reading about Philip and the Ethiopian official this week

And how Philip served as an ambassador to bring this person to faith;

I thought I had come across the perfect story for our community

In this season of living as Easter People in the world;

Living as people empowered by the Holy Spirit;

To live the good news and promise of Easter.

All the pieces are there:

Philip is a person following Christ and filled with the Holy Spirit, just like us;

Philip is listening for the leading of the Holy Spirit in his life

So that he can do God's will in the world, just like us.

He is faithful to God's urgings to go and find this man searching for God, just like us;

Philip is able to help the Ethiopian official by explaining an important part

Of the scriptures that talk about the Messiah, just like us;

He is then able to tell the whole story of Jesus' birth

And life and ministry and death and resurrection,

Revealing God's great love, just like us.

Philip is ready to sense that the Spirit has moved in another person, just like us;

And Philip is ready and willing to baptize the man and then go on his way,

Thankful that God has used him in some small way, just like us.

But the more I thought about the story as a perfect example of what our lives are like

As Easter People in the world today, how we are just like Philip;

I realized that most of us are not just like Philip, me included on many days.

We are not always in a kind of spiritual place where we can feel the Spirit's urgings;

We're not always ready to drop what we're doing,

Or to turn from our lives, ready to help someone else grow in their faith.

I'm not sure many of us would recognize this key passage of scripture
From the middle of the prophet Isaiah which describes Jesus
600 years before his time;
Or be able or even willing to take the time
To tell the story about Jesus' life and death and resurrection
In a way that is sensitive to the hearer, while true to the story.

Like baptism, most of us prefer to leave the telling and explaining of the story
To the professional Christians like . . . (Amanda, Sandy, Bill, Ed and Ken);
Or someone else, not like us, who seems more comfortable with this God stuff
And more willing to trust that God is using people, just like us,
For God's purposes and to show God's love to all.

But we can, all of us, be more like Philip in the way we live our lives;
We can be Easter People in the world;
And it's not going to come from learning some script
About the Bible and God and Jesus to convert people by word alone;
It's not by getting really good at church and liturgy
So that we know what all these words we use mean;
Or even being ready to baptize someone when there is water at hand
(Though you are allowed in the case of an emergency or the moving of the Holy Spirit).

No, we can be like Philip and millions of other Christians through the last 2,000 years
And in our own day if we will do one thing every day - abide;
If we will spend time in the presence of God
And experience and know and feel God's visitation and company in our lives.

Because it's in abiding with God
It's in spending time and living in the very presence of God
That we will grow in God's love and become like Jesus, like Philip
Like the Easter People that God is calling us all to become.

God will change us when we spend time with God;

God will move in our lives and we will not only be made ready as Philip was
But the quality and aroma of our lives will be so sweet to other people;
That they will want what we have
And it begins and continues and grows with our abiding in God.

Abiding

Now some of you may be expecting me to offer you a list of how you can abide better;
Or bear more fruit through your life and through St. David's;
By getting involved in some ministry or activity.

Lord knows I lean toward the action side of the Christian life;
I lean to the action side because I've so often experienced the spiritual life
Following the physical life in my life and in yours;
Because when you and I take the physical time to read the Bible, for example,
We are given insights from God for our daily living;
Or when we give to others, we are put in touch with God's generosity;
And all that God has given us.

But the Gospel this morning reminds us that to bear fruit;
To enter into a consistent pattern and life of love and loving;
We can't rely on ourselves and on our actions alone;
But are invited to abide with God, to be with God, to spend time with God;
Because fruit bearing and being Easter people
Are directly proportional to our relationship with the Vine.

One of my favorite Christian writers is a man named Andrew Murray;
Who wrote that the greatest gift of the Christian life
And the true purpose of the Christian life is fellowship with God, is abiding.
The connectedness to God in our lives is what gives us the strength and the capacity
So being connected to God every day is the crucial element in fruit bearing;
It's what feeds us so we can grow and be Easter People in the world.

Jesus uses an image that would have been familiar to His first followers

And to those who know something about gardening, and especially about grapes;

It is an image that speaks to the importance of staying connected to the vine.

And it's a fairly obvious image even to those of us who are not expert gardeners;

When branches or leaves or fruit are removed from a tree or a vine

They eventually wither and die so staying connected is critical for life.

I want to talk about abiding from a different kind of image I learned from my father

And continue to learn throughout my life.

My father was a strict, but incredibly loving man;

Swift to punish, quick to forget past transgressions;

He often quipped that I turned out to be okay

Because he spanked me every day whether he knew what I had done or not;

It wasn't really that way, thankfully, especially as I got older and bigger.

At some point in high school, ninth grade to be exact;

I started hanging out with some friends who were a little sketchy;

They smoked a little; they drank some; they didn't do their homework;

They were generally disrespectful of almost everyone and everything.

Over a three week period that fall, I got in trouble for smoking;

I was caught by a neighbor drinking one beer among four guys in our backyard;

And my parents got a call from a teacher that I had flunked a quiz.

As my father, started to remove his belt for some negative reinforcement;

He looked at me and said, "If you're going to run with skunks

You're going to smell like one."

Those words struck me harder than any belt because I had disappointed this man I loved

And because I knew that the aroma of my life was becoming a little stinky.

I must admit that I didn't become a model person from that moment on;
And continue to miss the mark and fail to be at my best all the time;
But I understood and I understand that who we are with;
That what we pay attention to and where we direct our hearts and lives
Will have a lot of bearing on who we are and what we are becoming.

You and I have to be spending time with God if we are going to be Christians;
You and I have to be paying attention to God's presence in our lives;
If we're going to love others and make a difference in the world;
Christ is the vine; you and I are the branches.

Christ is the Vine that offers limitless, unconditional love;
Christ is the Vine that offers forgiveness and mercy;
When we fall short of God's desire for our lives;
Christ is the Vine that was willing to die for us and rise again
So that sin and even death will not disconnect us from God;
Christ is the Vine that offers life and light and the power to bear fruit.

So staying connected to God in Jesus Christ, running with Jesus instead of anyone else
Will determine not only the kind of fruit that we will bear,
But whether we will bear fruit at all.

C. S. Lewis, the great Christian writer of the last century, once wrote
"That God has designed human beings to run on Himself, to run on God;"
He writes, "God is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn
Or the food our spirits are designed to feed on; there is no other."

"That is why," Lewis writes, "it's just no good asking God to make us happy
Without bothering about living the Christian life with God;
God cannot give us happiness or peace apart from Himself,
Because it's not there; There is no such thing."ⁱ

Roots and fruit, vine and branches,

Staying connected to God by spending time in prayer, by listening in silence

By reading the Bible and spiritual books, by coming to Church

Will keep us connected to God and help us grow in the Christian life;

And we will actually become more and more like Jesus

In our own individual ways and as this community of St. David's.

And so as we draw near to the end of this Easter season;

I invite you back to a little abiding;

I invite us all to remember to spend time with God every day

And throughout the day.

God will feed our souls and will help us to grow to become

Not only the persons God made us to be;

But also Easter People who are filled

With the love and the light and the grace of Jesus Himself.

And when we see people like Philip in the Bible or in our lives today

We can smile and give thanks that they are just like us;

And this all begins and continues and grows to fullness when we abide.

Amen.

ⁱ C. S. Lewis, excerpted from [The Joyful Christian](#)