

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER MAY 10, 2009 B

Acts 8: 26-40+1 John 4: 7-21+John 15: 1-8

Six years ago, my family and I went on a pilgrimage to Europe thanks to a sabbatical provided by the Lilly Endowment's National Clergy Renewal Program. Having spent the final part of our journey on the Isle of Iona in Scotland, we flew to Paris for a connecting flight home to Atlanta. While walking through Charles de Galle International Airport, we were caught by surprise when a young, dark-skinned boy the age of our son Alex (who was seven at the time), came up to him with a big smile and said 'hello' as if he knew him. I thought for a moment that this was a friendly child who perhaps never met a stranger, especially a child his own age. But we soon realized that the boy actually recognized Alex from the USA. They had played together once or twice at the Muslim Center back home in Fayetteville, Georgia, where they had met. Since 9/11, our Episcopal parish was invited each year to dinner during Ramadan and Alex used to say that there was a lot more room to play with the kids at the Muslim center than there was at our church.! That encounter between the two seven year olds in Paris was very brief, but it's made a lasting impression on me and, in a way I can't explain even to this day, I felt the presence of God in that moment.

The story we hear today in the Acts of the Apostles is a story about a pilgrimage an Ethiopian made to Jerusalem. He was on his way home to get back to work where he served in the court of the queen of Ethiopia as her financial steward. The writer tells us that he was traveling on a 'wilderness road' which suggests that it was a long and potentially dangerous journey.

Was this man a Jew, transplanted years ago from his religious roots and heritage - marginalized perhaps as 'unclean' by his culture and the Mosaic law because of his sexual status? Did he perhaps have a terminal illness and was the pilgrimage an opportunity to be reconciled with Yahweh by worshipping at the temple in Jerusalem? Was he a true pilgrim, searching for some spiritual meaning in his life? Was there something missing deep within him that all the riches of courtly life couldn't offer?

We don't know. But what we do know is that he probably purchased a scroll of the sacred scriptures, which gives us some insight perhaps into the nature of his spiritual hunger for meaning and purpose. And this is where Philip comes near the chariot and hears the Ethiopian reading the prophet Isaiah. Whether an angel of the Lord actually spoke to Phillip or whether the voice of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit moved his heart in that direction, he ran up and heard the Ethiopian reading out loud the prophet Isaiah. "Do you understand

what you are reading,” Phillip asked? And, as we heard, it led the Ethiopian to invite Phillip to sit in his chariot and join him on his journey, a journey which unexpectedly led both of them to stop along the sea, so the Ethiopian could be baptized.

The encounter these two men had on the ‘wilderness road’ offers us some food for thought for our own journey, especially at times and moments when we find ourselves in places or situations or relationships we didn’t plan to get into – and yet feel that there must be a reason God alone knows *why* we are *where* we are! I’m reminded of a philosopher named Blaise Pascal who once said that the heart has reason which reason can’t explain. It’s an insight I’ve always associated with the mysterious ways the Holy Spirit works in our lives. Our minds aren’t always able to explain the way of our hearts.

It’s where we find Jesus in today’s gospel: speaking from his heart in the intimacy of the upper room the night before he dies. The context is the Last Supper and Jesus is using the image of a vine and branches to speak of his abiding love for his disciples which will bear fruit through their faithfulness and example of generous service done in his name. Like a gardener who prunes a vine so it might bear more fruit, so Jesus lets his disciples know that they can expect some pruning to take place in their own lives, but that through it all, he will continue to be an abiding presence if they stay close to the vine, the source of life.

The intimate relationship implied in the gardening image of the vine and branches which Jesus speaks of before his death and resurrection and which John places in the context of the Last Supper, reminds me of the story of a mother who says good-bye to her two young children from her hospital bed as she struggles with a cancer that will claim her body but not her care or love for her children. Some of you may remember the deeply moving scene in the movie *Terms of Endearment*, an old movie which speaks of love and forgiveness, hope and healing, the enduring signs of Christ’s abiding presence.

Emma is in bed as her sons enter her hospital room. The oldest son, on the threshold of adolescence, has had a stormy relationship with his mother. His younger brother, about five or six, follows him into the room. The mother is happy to see her children. She encourages them to make a lot of friends in their lives. And then, looking at her eldest, the one who always seemed to be in conflict with her, she says, “Tommy, be sweet and stop trying to pretend you hate me. It’s silly.” “I like you,” Tommy says. “Then will you listen, especially close? I know you like me. I know it. The last year or two you’ve been pretending like you hate me. I love you very much. I love you as much as I love anybody. As much as I love myself. And in a few years when I haven’t been around to be on your tail about something or irritating you, you’re going to

remember the time I bought the baseball glove when you thought we were too broke, or when I read you the stories or let you goof off instead of mowing the lawn. Lots of things like that. And then you're going to realize that you love me. And maybe you're going to feel badly because you never told me. DON'T! Don't. I know that you love me. So don't ever do that to yourself, all right?" "OK," says Tommy. She asks them to give her a kiss. And then the two brothers leave her room.

It's stories like this and personal experiences we have which speak to the reality of the Risen Lord's presence – a presence which can transform our lives. For there's a divine energy within us – a power which can make things happen when the paths of other people touch ours, if we are open to this energy and trust its power to let the grace of God's love flow through us.

But it's easier said than done. So much of the criticism, for instance, I often hear people express whether toward themselves or toward other people – when I listen not just to spoken words but to people's hearts, is a deep-seated unhappiness with themselves. Maybe it has to do with a lack of meaning or purpose or love in their lives. I don't know. But what I do know is that there are stumbling blocks in each of our lives which keep us from bearing the kind of fruit Jesus intends for us to bear as his disciples. Perhaps this is where the garden metaphor of pruning comes into play.

God loves us. And because of God's love for us, we can truly love one another as Christ loves us, knowing that his abiding presence within us gives us the strength and conviction to love and to forgive and to bear fruit we otherwise would not be capable of doing if we depended on our own feelings. The love Jesus wants us to have for him and for others is more than a feeling. It's a decision, a commitment we are asked to make and to renew again and again in our lives.

If we listen carefully to the farewell message of Jesus in this 15th chapter of John, Jesus tells us clearly that the only way the world will know we are his disciples is by our love for one another. The fruit we bear through loving others is how we witness to the Risen Lord's presence. It's expressed best for me in part of a passage my mother-in-law requested to have read at her funeral, which took place this past January. It goes like this:

"When the time of our particular sunset comes, our thing, our accomplishment, won't really matter a great deal. But the clarity and care with which we have loved others will speak with vitality of the great gift of life we have been for each other."
(*"Wherever You Go," Gregory Norbet, The Monks of Weston Priory, Vermont*)

Amen.

*Bob Hudak
St. Paul's Church
Greenville, NC*