

A time to bear fruit.

John 15: 1 – 18

Acts 8: 26 -40

Let us pray:

"Southern trees bear a strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root / Black bodies swinin' in the Southern breeze / Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees." Open yourselves to the truth of God as His revelation speaks through Jesus Christ, the vine that makes you and I bear much fruit, including making the tent wider for love.

Amen.

Who are these people our passages from Acts speak of—Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch?

Philip, we are told, is one of those disciples who, unlike the rest, seized on the opportunity of the moment after resurrection and took action. This is Philip, who had yielded in submission to Christ when Jesus said, "Follow me!" without much hesitation (John 1: 45 -45). He takes the great commission seriously. While the other apostles are in a commune of sorts, Philips breaks rank and is steeped in the work of evangelism. That is why he is commemorated as Philip, the evangelist.

Something happens when we are steeped in the work of evangelism. In our baptismal vows, most of us here said, "Yes, I will follow you, Christ." After our hallelujahs from Easter, we have seen ourselves reenergized by the power of the resurrection and have taken to the streets to march for one cause or the other—or taken similar righteous action in different parts of our vulnerable and tender lives.

Yet the work isn't done, for there is a eunuch somewhere to whom God is calling your attention.

We know some things about eunuchs and Ethiopia from this biblical period. Ethiopia was the Greek word that simply referred to black people, evoking similar simplistic racial categories like "black/African American" we have today. It was a social construct, devastating then as it is today. Eunuch was a term that signified a different kind of indentured servitude to a royal court—and, yes, it was marred with sexual stigmatization as the same injustice meets sexual minorities in our own clerical offices across our church communities.

Many things have been said about this eunuch to explain his religiosity, including his function as another example that the Gospel of Christ was meant to be proclaimed from the river beyond sea of Palestine.

What has resonance for us, is that there are so many other eunuchs among us today whose hunger for freedom is as real as our protagonist.

Our children across college campuses want to understand why there isn't that love in Christ for the Palestinian lives that are being lost to the violence we are witnessing on television and social media.

Women across the country, and especially in a blue state like ours, wonder whether bodily integrity means anything when the disparities in birth care equate to an ignored death epidemic among would-be black mothers.

Our urban school districts are collapsing under our weight as the fiscal guard rails put in place privilege private interest, curtailing the dreams we have for education equity, and ushering in the gentrification of poorer communities.

I have no doubt that these are our Ethiopian Eunuchs. The world is watching and trying to understand what these gothic buildings like this one have to say when they hear the word Christian following legacies of martyrs like St. Phillip—or our own contemporary Archbishop Janani Jakaliya Luwum who was martyred for standing up against crimes against humanity in Uganda in the 1970s.

What has all this to do with us today?

You see, after the resurrection, we have been called into love. The kind of love that Cornel West says is "justice in the streets." Our Epistle reading clarifies that this is the love that does not require evidence of worship alone but of relating. This was what Jesus referred to as "love in truth and of

action" from our gospel reading last week.

How are we to be in this world when you look east to that road Philip and the eunuch met and still see desolation. Gaza is burning; bodies are swingin' not unlike the trees in Billie Holiday's song. **Strange fruit.**

Right here in Middletown, echoes of Racheal's children still can be heard in the chilling shrill of victims of mental and substance use disorders anguishing on their way to and fro to treatment at the CHC facilities. **Strange fruit.**

The uncertainty of living and the intermittent departure of your rectors is also a desolate place. After all, who is left to deal with the pastoral comfort your own grief has subsisted on for hope. **Strange fruit.**

As for society at large, it feels like an apocalypse is upon us because disease, violence, suicide, and ecological injustice have torn us apart. **Strange fruit.**

This strange fruit is the pretext of the Good News in our gospel, which I have come to proclaim.

"I 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."

Christian religiosity has been on the decline for a while now. It is so bad for those of us in the church industry that news about one clergy supporting four congregations is no longer a surprise. We are closing or merging congregations faster than we are raising up new ministries.

It could be hard to see how abiding in Christ in such times makes any sense. Wouldn't it be just as easy to go on with the bandwagon, becoming spiritual but not religious.

Notice that the Ethiopian Eunuch, in our Act passage, expresses an alternative to this dichotomous compromise. Philip asks him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" I love his response, "How can I possibly understand without someone guiding me."

Faith is polyamorous. Therein is the power of religion. I am using that term "polyamorous" both politically and rhetorically. Faith is meant to be in the community, and the sum of the actions of individuals acting in unison is intended to make the unimaginable visible.

Bishop Luwum died in Idi Amin's Uganda, so we are always reminded of those crimes against humanity that tear us away from abiding in Christ and result in no fruit.

Faith is polyamorous because we don't always have to see eye to eye and be everything to one another because we belong to a vine that has many expressions of love.

If you are seeking that love, this altar is being prepared for you for your healing. Come forth during communion and be united in this relationship of love. Abide in Christ. There is a mission for you yet here. The spirit that snatched away Philip is present here today.

Come replenish your hope for peace, for justice, for love, for equity. Abide in Christ.

"Get up and go towards the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza. (This is a wilderness road.)"

Abide in Christ.

Let us close in Prayer:

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck / For the rain to gather, the wind to suck / For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop / Here is a strange and bitter crop." In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Open yourselves to the truth of God as His revelation speaks through Jesus Christ, the vine that makes you and I bear much fruit.

Amen.