

## Easter 5

Readings: Acts 8: 26 – 40  
Psalm 22: 25 – 31  
1 John 4: 7 – 21  
John 15: 1 – 8

On this fifth Sunday of Easter season, the lectionary continues to remind us of the significance of Jesus' presence for his community of followers. The readings continue to challenge our understanding of what it means to belong to and live out our identity as people of God.

As part of Jesus' farewell speech to his disciples, the writer of the fourth Gospel provides another opportunity to encourage the community that is to be left behind. Before his betrayal, arrest and journey to the cross, Jesus, again affirms his followers and their relationship to him and each other. "I am the true vine" and "you are the branches"; "abide in me as I abide in you" (Jn. 15: 1-5). For John, these words anticipate a time when, although Jesus' physical presence would not be as before, his continued presence through the Spirit will keep them in their faith.

Our passage from John poses challenging questions to us today about our self-identity. What does it mean for the church to live as "branches" in Christ who is the "vine"?

The image of community that emerges from our reading in John is one of interrelationship, mutuality, and indwelling. To get to the full sense of this interrelationship, it may be helpful to visualise what the branches of a vine actually look like. In a vine, branches are almost completely indistinguishable from one another. It can be very difficult to determine where one branch stops and another one starts. All run together as they grow out of the central vine. What this vine image suggests about community, then, is that there are no free-standing individuals or groups in community; instead, they are ones who encircle one another completely. The fruitfulness of each of each individual branch depends on its relationship to the vine, nothing else. What matters for John is that each is connected together through Christ who is rooted in the will of God who is the vinegrower.

Our relationship with Christ and with each other produces something. Jesus said: “Abide 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” (v. 4). The Greek word for “abide” means to “stay put” or to “stick it out,” to remain steadfast. For John, the continued abiding is continued believing; a commitment by his followers to keep faith in Christ even when he may no longer be around as before.

The vine and branches metaphor encourages the community to remain steadfastness or committed in its relationship to Jesus; and it is a commitment that is measured by the community’s fruits. The verse 9 which is just after our reading says: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved

you; abide in my love.” To be committed to Christ is to be committed to his love. To keep and live out their faith as followers of Jesus, they are also charged to live out the love which he had for them. We hear the echoes of Christ’s commandment to them in chapter 13: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another” (Jn. 13: 34).

To bear fruit – that is, to act in love – is therefore a corporate act by the community. It is rooted in Jesus’ love for the community and holds the community’s embrace of that love as central to the way it orders its life. To live as the branches of the vine is to belong to an organic unity shaped by the love of Jesus. We do not love purely as individuals in the community, but as a community. To live according to this model, then, the church would be a community in which members are known for the acts of love that they do in common with all other members.

But there are some uncomfortable things about this vine metaphor. Even though a branch produces fruit, it is pruned nonetheless so that produces more. Pruning may have negative connotations as if it is punishment of some sort or the loss of something. But the word infers a cleansing for more positive or healthier results. However, some branches, for whatever reason, do not abide in the vine and therefore do not produce fruit. As a consequence, it withers and is thrown in the fire and burned (v. 6).

The reality for the early followers of Jesus, as is for us in the church today, was that despite the appeal to people to abide in the faith and service of

God, not all do. People have their own reasons, and there are perhaps many, for why they decide to disengage or disassociate from and leave the church. Maybe the empty pews in our own church are testimony to this.

But the words of Jesus to abide in him are clearly an invitation and one that requires an intentional response. It is an invitation that opens a door for people to belong, learn, live and grow in God's love. It is God who makes the fruit grow through the branches; the branches simply abide in the vine. It is the same for us. As we remain in Christ, Christ works out his loving purposes through us. We cannot do God's will outside of a relationship with God.

Therefore, we belong together and can serve together in the church. Growing in Christ's love is experienced in Christ's community. This can happen even though it is not always easy. The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in our reading from Acts affirms this.

Philip was a Greek-speaking Jewish Christian, who, though living in Jerusalem at the time was, perhaps, originally from somewhere else in the Mediterranean. He was one of seven such people, along with Stephen (who was later stoned to death) who were chosen to assist the work of the apostles. This came about as a result of a dispute between the Greek-speaking and Hebrew-speaking Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, about the treatment of some of the Greek-speaking Christian widows. We can see here that, even in the early Christian communities, there were issues about belonging and what form a caring and appropriate response would take.

But after Stephen's death, many Christians, mainly the Greek-speaking ones, fled Jerusalem, but continued to serve as Christ's followers wherever they went. Philip was one of these people. He worked with and converted many in Samaria, the despised half-breed relatives of the Jews (who were seen more as enemies). Again, Philip's work among them witnessed to the openness of the fellowship that Christ offered. From there he returned to Jerusalem where the Spirit of God led him to encounter the Ethiopian eunuch.

Although an African native from Ethiopia, Luke tells us that the eunuch had been to Jerusalem to worship. He was a proselyte; a believer in the Jewish faith, though not a Jew by birth. As such, he could participate in some Jewish practices, but as a foreigner, he was not always fully embraced as an Israelite; not openly accepted as part of God's chosen people. As eunuch who was castrated, this limited his involvement even more. No matter how devout he was in reading Hebrew scriptures and saying his prayers, religious regulations (Lev. 21: 17-21; Deut. 23:1) with regard to persons of his condition prevented him from worshipping in the temple. He sought to belong, but the rules and practices, and even perhaps the prejudice or discrimination from some people, meant that he could not really have a place in the believing community. Even with sacred scriptures in hand, and in trying to make sense of his experiences, it evokes the question: "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

That someone was Philip. In spite of all that had happened to the eunuch, again, it did not stop Philip from reaching out to him. As a person who, himself, didn't fit quite nice and neat amongst his own people, Philip probably knew what it was what like to be on the fringes or on the outside of the in-crowd. Yet, he reached out to connect with Samaritans, and now was engaging with a foreigner who, himself, was trying to find a home and a family in the faith where he could belong. Philip did not allow the eunuch's ethnicity, culture, condition, or status to prevent him from having a place to belong in Christ. He helped the eunuch to understand or re-think his faith in light of the Jesus story.

And it was in this Jesus story that the eunuch was able to connect and relate with Philip in a way he never thought was possible. Through his baptism, the eunuch and Philip became one in Christ and part of the Christian community – the body of Christ. This new relationship of their unity in Christ was one that transcended all kinds of barriers, including ethnic and cultural ones.

This is possible because of the relationship people have with God. This is possible when God's work of love is demonstrated through people to others. This is possible because God's love in people can enable them to care enough for others despite the things that are different between them. This is possible when followers of Jesus, like Philip, abide in Christ and in his love.

That is what our reading from 1 John chapter 4 emphasises to us: “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (v.16). It is a love that is to be exercised in community – the community of Christ, the church. It is a love that enables us to reach out and to connect with others instead of detaching or disengaging from others. It is a love that builds trust instead of fear – “There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear” (v. 18). It is a love that cannot have contradictions or limitations about acceptance or receiving one another in the church. 1 John 4: 20 talks about those who say, “I love God,” whom they have not seen, yet are indifferent to their brothers and sisters in Christ that they do see. That is not consistent with God’s love. It is a love between and among us that reassures us that we have a family in Christ and that we belong together.

In my talks with people about their views of the church, a common thread in their stories is the sense of lack of genuine care and concern in the connections or relations they have with people in the church – even with ministers like me. Christ the true vine and we are the branches. We trust that the presence of Christ continues to be with us. But, where is the fruit on the branches? Where is the love in the church? Is it only for those whom we are comfortable with, those who affirm us, those who are like us, those who are well established in the church, or does it extend to and include those on the fringes who may be trying to find a place and family to belong?

God’s love can keep us together and hold us together inclusive of our ethnicity, culture, gender, and social status. The unity in diversity of the church is the richness of God’s grace to all. It is like the Harvest

Thanksgiving arrangement displayed before us all today where different produce, shapes, sizes and colours all contribute to the rich variety of God's creation – of which we are part.

Maybe there are those here who, like the eunuch, are seeking to make sense of where and how they might belong with God's people. Maybe their experiences might also evoke the question "How can I, unless some one guides me?" Well, who is daring enough to be like Philip? Who is willing enough and caring enough to respond? How would you respond? Amen.