

Abide in the Vine

Fifth Sunday of Easter

April 28, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar
St. David's Episcopal Church, North
Chesterfield, VA

Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Acts 8:26-40 (NRSV)

Then an 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.)²⁷ So 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 worship²⁸ and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.²⁹ Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it."³⁰ So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"³¹ He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.³² Now 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."³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?"³⁵ Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.³⁶ As 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?”³⁷ ³⁸ He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him.³⁹ When 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.⁴⁰ But 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.

John 15:1-8 (NRSV)

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

Those of you with keen eyesight and hearing may have discerned that, contrary to what your bulletin says I am not Elizabeth Felicetti. I was asked to be available for this Sunday if Elizabeth couldn't make it, so here I am. I ran into Gary at the gym on Thursday and he told me the two of them are doing the best they can given the ordeal of her chemotherapy. I know you are all keeping them in your prayer and in your hearts.

I'd like to take the opportunity this morning to look at our Scripture readings with Elizabeth's tenure as your rector in mind. In our gospel reading today, Jesus uses the metaphor of a vine and its branches to illustrate our need to stay connected to him. He uses the metaphor of the grape vine to show that unless the branch is connected to the vine, it can't grow grapes, and if we don't stay connected to him, we can't bear fruit.

For “stay connected,” Jesus uses “**abide**”. “**Abide**” is not a word we use very much, is it? When you ask someone for their address you don't ask them, “Where do you abide?” And they don't answer, “I abide at my abode at 29 Elm Street.” Someone's abode is the place they live. “Abode” is related to “abide”.

“To abide” means to remain, to dwell. That’s what Jesus means in this morning’s gospel. He wants us to take up permanent, ongoing residence in him.

This is what it means to be a Christian. For example, you may have noticed that in Paul’s letters he refers to Christians as being “**in Christ.**” For example, in Romans 8:1 he says, “**There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are *in Christ Jesus.***” We are in Christ Jesus through our baptism and faith. As the Catechism tells us, “**The inward and spiritual grace in Baptism is union with Christ in his death and resurrection, birth into God’s family the Church, forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit.**” (BCP p. 858) But our union with Christ is not automatic. It requires constant upkeep and attention. It requires faith in Jesus. That’s why Jesus commands the disciples to abide in him.

There are three ways we abide in Jesus once he has put us in himself by our faith in him. **First**, by immersing ourselves in his word, the Bible. Jesus speaks to us in the whole Bible, not just the New Testament. Our reading from Acts gives us a great example of how Jesus shines forth from the Old Testament. Philip encounters this man on the road to Gaza. He’s reading from Isaiah 53:7-8. Now we hear these verses in church only on Good Friday, and every three years in the readings for Proper 24 Year B, which this year happens to fall on October 20. But it’s clear that listening to Bible readings on Sundays is not what Jesus has in mind here. And it’s not what this man was doing. He was studying and wrestling with the Book of Isaiah. Jesus means for us to stay close to him as he speaks to us from his word. He means praying to him to open our minds to understand the Scriptures. Prayer is the **second** way we abide in Jesus. Not just asking him for things, but asking to be closer to him, to understand him, to please him in all we say and do.

And **doing** is the third way. We do what he wants. That’s how he answers prayer. This morning he gives us this amazing promise: “**If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.**” What he means is that as we abide in him, what we wish for becomes what he wishes for. As we learn to abide with him, our desires become aligned with his desires. What is his desire? That we bear much fruit.

Now a word about fruit. I think when we hear the Bible command us to be fruitful think of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23: “**love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.**”

We think of bearing fruit means as becoming a better person. Now that's very true. Jesus wants me to be a better person. I want to become a better person. And you can be sure my wife wants me to become a better person too. But that's not what Jesus is talking about here. He's talking about bringing people to him.

Were you aware that a tomato is a fruit? Or a cucumber? A fruit has seeds in it that make it possible for the plant it comes from to produce more like itself. Next week's gospel continues chapter 15 from this week's. In it you'll hear Jesus tell us in verse 16, **"You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name."** The fruit that Jesus is talking about is people. Jesus has borne fruit for his Father in drawing the twelve disciples, and they in turn will bear more fruit by bringing more people to him. And there's his promise to answer prayer for the things he wants again. As we seek what he seeks in prayer, he opens doors and leads people to himself. You and I are part of that fruit that he promised the apostles, and it's up to us in turn to bear fruit for the Father.

We can see this dynamic at work in Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip had just come from Samaria, where with Peter and John he had been evangelizing the people there with great success. Undoubtedly the apostles prayed for the Holy Spirit to be active in their sharing the gospel, and he was. So now we're told Philip goes to another person outside the Jewish community, and through the word of God, the Spirit brings that person to Jesus too.

Through an angel, Philip obeys the prompting of the Holy Spirit to come up to this man's chariot, where the man is reading from Isaiah 53. The man wants to know who the prophet is talking about in this description of someone being made to suffer and be unjustly killed. Philip answers the man's question about the Scripture: Isaiah is talking about Jesus, because the whole Bible is about Jesus. The man puts his faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of his sins and the gift of eternal life and Philip baptizes him. So Philip bears fruit for the Father by abiding in Jesus.

Which brings us to Elizabeth's ministry among you for the last 13 years. I think you all would agree that she has had a very fruitful ministry here at St. David's. I know she has baptized many of you and your children, and brought you closer to Jesus. She has brought you to Jesus, and now you need to abide in

him through studying and wrestling with his word, through constant prayer to know him better, and through doing his will by bringing others to him.

Throughout Elizabeth's time away, I've filled in on enough Sunday mornings to see how beautifully and joyfully and efficiently you go about the Lord's work and your life as a parish without her. That's because Jesus is here. Elizabeth is your pastor, but Jesus is your good shepherd. Her time with you as your rector is drawing to a close. But Jesus is always here. Remember: he has appointed you to bear much fruit. You can do that as you abide in him.

Let us pray.

O God, who by the glorious resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light: Grant that we, who have been raised with him, may abide in his presence and rejoice in the hope of eternal glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be dominion and praise for ever and ever. Amen