

Sermon: Easter 5

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April 29, 2018

Year B
Acts 8:26-40
Psalm 22:24-30
1 John 4:7-21
John 15:1-8

The practice of grafting one tree or plant onto another is an ancient one... it's sometimes done to protect against disease... sometimes done to enhance fruit production... sometimes done for purely ornamental reasons... and a recent paper on the history of grafting... from Purdue University... revealed that while grafting is not specifically mentioned in Jewish Scriptures or Talmudic sources... many references appear to suggest that it was practiced... the biblical texts that allude to grafting... mention the grapevine as a parable... and refer to the reversion from cultivated grapes... to wild grapes...

However... one of the earliest verifiable references to grafting is from a Hippocratic treatise thought to have been written around 424 BCE... the treatise suggests that the development of a child... both in the womb and afterwards... parallels that of the already established practice of grafting... which was a common technique at that time... and in 160 BCE... Marcus Porcius wrote the oldest surviving Latin text about grafting... called *De Agri Cultura*... On Farming Agriculture... which outlines several grafting methods...

And when one plant is grafted onto another... there is a kind of adoption... taking The Other... as one's own... and scripture speaks about similar connections... from Romans 8:15... *for you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear... but you have received a spirit of adoption...* Romans 8:23... *but we ourselves... who have the first fruits of the Spirit... groan inwardly while we wait for adoption...* Romans 9:4... *they are Israelites... and to them belong the adoption... the glory... the covenants... and the promises...* Galatians 4:5... *in order to redeem those who were under the law... so that*

we might receive adoption as children... and Ephesians 1:5... God destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ...

And in today's Gospel... Jesus talks about branches which abide in the vine... branches which receive nourishment from the vine... and which bear fruit... or are pruned... so they can bear more fruit... but the branches which bear no fruit... are cut off and thrown into the fire...

I don't know about you... but when I read about branches being cut off and thrown into the fire... I think about each branch being a person... and I worry that if I don't bear enough fruit... don't bear the right kind of fruit... I'll be cut off and thrown in... and that thinking is fueled by a judgmental society... so much so... that we're already halfway to... *being thrown into outer darkness... where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth...*

But what if the branches that are gathered and burned... aren't people... what if they're some of the ways we think... or some of the attitudes we have... or the decisions we make... which prevent us from bearing good fruit... which erect barriers... and decide who's in and who's out... what if the branches that are cut off are our judgements themselves... what if the branches that are cut off are the ones that put the good of the few above the good of the many... or flat out reject that we're all interconnected... the way we're interconnected in our baptisms... within the body of Christ...

And our reading from Acts... is one of startling interconnection... we're presented with an unusual situation... Professor Wil Gafney reminds us that Philip... with his Greek name... represents a significant departure from the rabid anti-Hellenism of the Maccabees... and even if he was Jewish... he would not have been Jewish enough for some... but an angel instructed Philip to get up and go... so we know that God was in this... and not just Philip... and on a wilderness road... on a dry desert road... he meets up with an Ethiopian eunuch... a black man... and this was no schlub... a court official

of the Kandake... from which we get the name Candace... Queen of the Ethiopians... he is in charge of her entire treasury... he was educated and can read... and he has purchased... an expensive scroll of the prophet Isaiah... but as a eunuch... he is also embodied in a way that defies gender binaries... that is... strictly male or strictly female... he was a third way of being... like a two-spirit Native American... or a transgender person... but he had come to Jerusalem to worship... so he must also have been Jewish... though as a eunuch... Leviticus 21:20 and Deuteronomy 23:1 would have prohibited him from making his offering in the Temple...

The reading from Acts specifies which passage he was reading... and Philip expounded on it... highlighting the Good News about Jesus... but the Book of Isaiah... the scroll the eunuch had... contains a passage that would have held special meaning for him... and for many others... because Ch. 56... Vv. 3-5... called for the full inclusion of eunuchs... listen... *Do not let the eunuch say... "I am just a dry tree." For thus says the Lord... to the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths... who choose the things that please me... and hold fast my covenant... I will give... within my house and within my walls... a monument and a name better than sons and daughters... I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off...*

Please let me remind you... that this is Christian scripture... affirming through its Jewish roots... through its own prophetic words... that even those who didn't adhere to stereotypical gender roles... even those who didn't fit the kind of mold some people then... or today... would impose... even those who did not reflect Levitical purity laws... were eligible to receive from God... *a monument and a name better than sons and daughters...* that a prophet of great account... was telling this man that he mattered... that he was worthy of adoption... of full inclusion... that he too could be grafted on... no wonder the eunuch was reading Isaiah... can you imagine the hope that these words gave him...

So along this desert road... somewhere between Jerusalem and Gaza... there is the study of scripture... in community... and on this desert road... in this unlikely place... the eunuch says... *"Look... here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"*... what indeed... and there's not even a hint... that Philip and the eunuch talked about doctrinal... cultural... theological... or interpretive issues... that would determine his worthiness... Philip just baptized him...

Catherine MacLean... senior minister at St. Paul's United Church in Edmonton, Alberta... wrote... the Ethiopian eunuch comes up soon after the resurrection... with the empty tomb on our minds... we ask one another... with Philip... do you understand what you are reading... [do we...] the world will change when all are welcomed... when we lean on one another... when we trust the source of all life... the risen Christ... the God who is in it together with us... then we'll reach even deeper through the vine to our roots... trusting the strength of that vine... and the care of the vine grower... only then we will abide each other well...

It's been almost 2,000 years... and many denominations are still arguing about who's welcomed in... and who's not... and we have to ask ourselves what motivates this kind of thinking... and these attitudes... and what strengthens them... because when we isolate ourselves... and when we allow diversity to become divisive... we will wither... and we will cut ourselves off... but in baptism... when we wash away our isolationism... our fierce independence... and our self-reliance... when we acknowledge that as beloved as we are... we just can't do it all on our own... and when we take on the mind of Christ... as we are meant to... we will bear much fruit...

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