

Sermon – Acts 8:26-40; John 15:1-8
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Grace Lutheran Church
5 Easter – Year B
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“Why Not?”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The Lyle family is in need of some pruning. Now, I don't mean to suggest that we need to reduce the size of our family. I hope that's not the case; I fear the other four would think that I should be the first to go. What I mean is that there's just so much going on. All of it good, all of it life giving, and *all of it* threatening to get in the way of everything else. Our days have devolved into strategy sessions and calendaring meetings designed to make sure that everyone gets to the right place at the right time in an endless litany of events. These days, that includes track and field, piano lessons, gymnastics, t-ball, and hockey. And those are just my activities! In all seriousness, there is just so much to do, and I haven't even mentioned our life at Grace as pastor, teacher, and students. Our family is growing in so many ways and in so many directions, that it just might be time for some pruning, some cutting back in some areas so that we can continue to grow and thrive, so that our lives can bear fruit. Or maybe we'll just maintain this ever-crazier schedule for the next fourteen years and then take a nice, long nap.
2. Our lives are often in need of pruning, the loving, needful act of cutting back, cutting away, so that new growth can emerge and life continue. Jesus picks up this image in his conversation with the disciples on the night before his death. In his final predicate nominative “I AM” statement (the sayings in which Jesus says “I AM this, or I AM that”), Jesus declares himself to be the true vine while we are the branches. His Father is the vinegrower, pruning us

- that we might bear more fruit. Sounds good, but these words come with an edge: Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. What starts out sounding like gospel rings in our ears like a threat: Bear fruit, or else. A minor spiritual crisis could ensue: Am I bearing enough fruit? Of the right kind? Am I abiding in him? And if so, does that mean I can ask God for whatever I wish? And if so, well, why does that not seem to be working out?
3. We need a different question to get at the heart of what Jesus means here, and we are given one this morning from the mouth of the Ethiopian Eunuch. There, on the wilderness road from Jerusalem to Gaza, the Eunuch turns to Philip the Evangelist, and asks, “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” The question comes not simply after their conversation so far, but after a lifetime of being cut off. The eunuch is a man about whom we know very little. But we know he was a Gentile, and a dark-skinned one at that. We know that he had access to power and prestige, and yet he yearned for something else. He has come to know of Israel’s God. He journeys to Jerusalem to worship. Did he know he wouldn’t be able to do so? Not fully? For as a eunuch, Deuteronomistic Law prohibits his entry into the Temple. As a eunuch he is cut off from life – from the possibility of procreation *and* from the presence of the Creator. The Eunuch, there on the road, reads the scriptures, the song of the Suffering Servant from Isaiah. He reads of God’s servant, led away to be slaughtered, humiliated. And in just a few verses, he’ll read that the Servant was cut off from the land of the living. Captivated but confused, the Eunuch turns to Philip, confessing that he doesn’t understand. But Philip does.
 4. Philip proclaims the good news about Jesus, God’s suffering servant Son who allowed himself to be cut off from the land of the living so that no one needs to be cut off from life. Because Jesus was cut off from life but raised from the dead, the Eunuch is no longer cut off from Creator or community; the Spirit

has carried him right over all those barriers that once seemed so solid. And with courage that comes from newfound hope, he spots some water and asks to be baptized. “Why not?” he asks. “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” In Christ the answer is so obvious, Philip doesn’t even have to say anything. They go down to the water, and the Eunuch comes back connected to life and goes on his way rejoicing.

5. Jesus’ words to his disciples are not threats. They are grace-filled descriptions of what happens when those once cut off, by sin and death, are grafted anew onto the only true source of life: Jesus Christ the vine. We are able to abide in Christ because he has chosen to abide in us. And we will bear fruit, often in spite of ourselves, because that’s what branches do when they’re connected to the vine. And *of course* we can do nothing if not connected to the vine; but *we are* connected to the vine, and so doing nothing isn’t really an option. So what are we called to do? We continue the story of the Book of Acts, bringing with us the good news of Jesus Christ that knocks down barriers one after the other, creating unity among God’s people because in Christ, we are connected to the same, single source of life. And we live out the teachings of John: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God.”
6. And here is where we need some pruning, of course. It turns out that we are not instantly great at sharing the good news or loving those around us. Too often we still see barriers and divisions instead of the work of the Spirit that will not be impeded. But connected to Christ, we can trust that this cutting back, though perhaps painful, can lead to even greater growth, health, and life. Yesterday, the North American church lost one of its pruners, those who speak truths that we don’t always want to hear, but who do so out of love, with the hope that growth will follow. Yesterday, the Rev. Dr. James Cone, founder of Black Liberation Theology, died. His life and teaching gave voice to God’s concern for the poorest and weakest members of society – those so

often cut off from justice and peace in this world. Ten years ago, in an interview on National Public Radio, Cone said, "Black theology is an understanding of the Gospel which sees justice for the poor as the very heart of what the Christian Gospel is about and the very heart of what God is doing in this world." On this day when we've witnessed the work of the Spirit that can bring Philip and the Ethiopian together, these two men who had no worldly reason to come into contact with each other, it seems fitting to look to the pruning that still needs to be done in our world – to see that God is still calling us across worldly boundaries as the Spirit creates the loving community of which John speaks, of a vine reaching out with branches of love and care, for *all* people, to the ends of the earth.

7. And God will see it done. The resurrection of Christ makes this clear. God overturns our sentence of crucifixion, denies our end to the story, insisting that it go on, and that it be a story of life and love. God will see it done. We don't have to be the vine that gives life, only the branches through which life flows. We don't have to save ourselves, for God has done so in baptism, which nothing can prevent. We don't have to create love or figure out how to love; we look to Christ, and we love because he first loved us. Christ the vine continues to give life to this world. His branches reach out to the ends of the earth, crawl over boundaries and barriers to create the beloved community, reach into graves to raise the dead, and climb up to heaven that we would see God. Jesus Christ abides in you. He has chosen you. He is working life and bearing fruit in you. Grafted into Christ, you will never again be cut off or thrown away. As God prunes you, bear fruit. Abide in Christ, whose resurrected life is life enough, for this whole world and the world to come. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*