

**Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B, RCL**  
**Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:24-30; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8**  
**May 3, 2015**  
**The Rev. Danae Ashley**

“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).” Uh-oh. Hearing that God is sending you down a wilderness road is like a friend telling you, “Come for a hike on these great trails I know” and you think that this will be a pleasant day on well-known trails, but when you get there, you don’t see a trail. Well, there’s a faint deer trail that surely couldn’t be what your friend meant. Oh. Yep, that’s what they meant—they’re going to forge a new trail in the wilderness and they want to do it with you. Oh boy. This story we hear in Acts is exactly like hiking with your friend—except that the wilderness is not only literal wilderness, but in the Bible, it is a place that you encounter God. These wilderness places are not always the most pleasant of places, yet that is where God is—always doing something new in the most unexpected way (did you see the videos in the E-Messenger?).

We cannot hope to make sense of our life’s journey or God’s call without one another. We need others to help us see who we really are—to help us accept even the most difficult parts of ourselves so that we can become whole. This is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and community. God doing something new.

Our story from the early church, in Acts, reveals this to be true. Philip is told by the Holy Spirit to join a chariot where a eunuch was reading the prophet Isaiah aloud—the custom was to read things aloud, even when you were by yourself. Philip asks if the eunuch understands what he is reading and he says, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” What a wonderfully honest question. No pretending that he knows something he doesn’t or arrogantly believing that his own interpretation is better than Philip’s. Instead, the eunuch welcomes guidance from this stranger who has joined him. They go about discussing the Scriptures and Philip proclaims the good news about Jesus.

How many of us have had nudges from the Holy Spirit? You don’t know why, but you feel you should go talk to this person or buy something extra from the store, only to see the results later. How many of us ignore those nudges because we’re too tired, we can’t be bothered, or perhaps we are so out of touch, we don’t even feel the nudge? The Holy Spirit still moves among us, just as it did in those early days of Christianity, but our ability to believe and follow is lost in the fog of so many other things demanding our attention. It is hard to keep a steady course.

We are called to change the world with God’s love. The term “love” is thrown around with ease these days, but when applied to God it means something deep and abiding. It means we are loyal to God with all our heart, mind, and strength. It means that when we say, “I love God,” but then turn around and are hateful to our brothers and sisters in this world, we lie to ourselves and to our God. We spread poison and not love. It’s easy to love those that love us, but to love those that are hurting us or don’t agree with us...that is where the road is hard. We know this. We look at the news to what’s happening across our nation or in the world to bear witness to how hard it is to truly love our neighbor, but we don’t even have to do that. We just have to look in the mirror.

We don't have to like our neighbors, but we do have a distinct call to love. When I lived in Minneapolis, I experienced a phenomenon that Minnesotans are known for—"Minnesota Nice". It's a true thing—ask a Minnesotan (am I right Minnesotans in the congregation?). My Bishop in Minnesota described it like this: If you were traveling down a snowy road and your car stopped in front of a Minnesotan's house and you couldn't get it started again, that dear soul who lived there would put on all their warm clothes and gear and do everything in their power for the next two hours to get your car started and when you finally get going down the road and you're waving good-byes with freezing fingers and full bladders you realize they never once invited you in. Yet, they were nice as could be! What a Minnesotan would say is they figured you were on your way somewhere so they didn't want to detain you. This misses the point of what it means to love your neighbor—it means that you invite them in to your world and you allow their world to penetrate yours a little bit. Love is hard work. It is honest work. It means pruning the vines and setting up boundaries and frameworks so that the vineyard is a safe place to grow. Love is hospitality of the spirit and of the hearth.

Thankfully, we're not called to do this alone. We are the branches of the vine. We get our nourishment from God—it is through God that we are able to love our neighbors and ourselves. Our hearts and our lives are not big enough alone, but with God, the fruits will be evident.

The follow is a story, by Megan McKenna, about the difficulty of discipleship:

There was a woman who wanted peace in the world and peace in her heart and all sorts of good things, but she was frustrated. The world seemed to be falling apart. One day she decided to go shopping. She walked into a store and was surprised to see Jesus behind the counter. Finally she got up her nerve and asked, "Excuse me, are you Jesus?" "I am." "Do you work here?" "No," Jesus said, "I own the store." "Oh, what do you sell in here?" "Oh, just about anything!" "Anything?" "Yes, anything you want. What do you want?" She said, "I don't know." "Well," Jesus said, "feel free, walk up and down the aisles, make a list, see what it is you want, and then come back and we'll see what we can do for you."

She did just that, walked up and down the aisles. There was peace on earth, no more war, no hunger or poverty, peace in families, no more drugs, clean air, careful use of resources. By the time she got back to the counter, she had a long list. Jesus took it, skimmed through it, looked up at her, and smiled. "No problem." And then he bent down behind the counter and picked out all sorts of things, stood up, and laid out the packets. She asked, "What are these?" Jesus replied, "Seed packets. This is a catalog store." She said, "You mean I don't get the finished product?" "No, this is a place of dreams. You come and see what it looks like. I give you the seeds. You plant them. You go home and nurture them and help them grow, and someone else reaps the benefit." "Oh," she said. And she left the store without buying anything.

I pray that we wouldn't walk away from that store empty-handed, but full of hope and determination and joy in knowing the Risen Lord. Like the eunuch in Acts, we should go out rejoicing and sharing what we have received. We are expected to be disciples—striving to follow Jesus in the mission field of our own lives. May we go out into our mission field this week, obeying the urgings of the Holy Spirit, helping others interpret God's call to them, and showing the world what it means to be the fruit of God's vine. AMEN.