

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 8:26-39 (John 15:1-8; 1 John 1:18-24)

Now the angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road out of town, and share engaging lessons about the felt needs of those who come, to make their life better. Maybe, while you are at it, find Bible verses, from whatever translation fits your self-appointed message best, to quote in support of your regurgitated platitudes. Be sure to be hip. I heard the GAP in Jerusalem is having a sale. Earthy colors are in. Do your best to manufacture ways to talk to people about church, preferably using hokey tracts. Be sure to tell them about that joy, joy, joy, joy down in your heart. Every once in a while, have people fill out a card when they want to go to heaven, and tell them they just accepted Jesus."

Jesus said, "I am the vine and you are the branches. When you decide you want to be part of my vine, just jam your branch in and tell me you will be joining the team. But you better tithe enough, love enough, and smile enough, or you can't be on my vine. If you don't seem to be growing, go to the Christian bookstore and buy any book but my Word, listen to an uplifting song, preferably one with a great hook, or just make up your mind to be better. When you pray, tell me how much wonderful progress you have made. If you haven't made wonderful progress, keep it to yourself, because no one wants to be around a backsliding Christian. Remember, I am the vine and you are the branches, so make sure you make me look good.

John wrote, "When your hearts condemn you, just believe more. After all, if you don't have faith, you can't go to heaven. So, you'd better do some real soul-searching to see if you have enough faith, if you have been good enough, if you have believed sincerely enough, if you have worshipped authentically enough, if you have walked straight enough. Remember, your hearts are greater than God, and so how you feel about your faith and about God determines everything."

What a mess we make of things sometimes! How often we divorce Christ from the Christian life! How often we try to manufacture what God alone can give and arrange! How often we try to be the judge of what God alone can judge! How often we miss the point about whom God's Word, God's service, the Christian faith, the Christian life, and Christian love is all about!

How often don't we tell you people to go and tell more people about Jesus! How often don't we spew drivel about every member being a missionary and send you out like politicians with talking points! No, if I want you to introduce your friends to Jesus, I have to introduce you to Him first. I can't preach to you about Jesus. I have to preach Jesus to you. If you meet Him in the gospel, you'll have plenty to say about Him.

Philip walked into a chance to share his faith. As further proof God is Lutheran, He made sure to give Philip an appointed text from Isaiah. Philip didn't revert to some pre-planned and artificial presentation. He talked about Jesus at the time and in the situation he was placed in to the person who asked about him.

Imagine if someone asked you about your mother. You would be able to tell them about good old mom because you know her; you love her. You are not a salesman representing mom. You are her son or daughter, and so you talk like her son or daughter.

In Catechism class, right before we start the Creed, I tell the kids to imagine they are playing basketball with a friend who asks them who God is. I give them quite some time to come up with a response. Without fail so far, every time I come back in the room, they have this nervous, confused look on their face, because they can't come up with much to say. They think they have to come up with some fancy or innovative way to talk about Jesus. They think there is a right way or a wrong way. They think they have to manage the situation, control the atmosphere, and guide the discussion to some mountaintop moment. They forget their friend just asked them about their Brother, about their Father, about their Counselor. After they've sweated enough, I say, "Could you mention that you believe in God the Father, the maker of heaven and earth? Could you mention that you believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord?" Eventually the light bulb

pops up over their heads. They know this. Jesus isn't the answer to some trick question. Jesus is a person they know. They know more about God than they thought.

I am afraid there are going to be a lot of bad sermons preached on the first lesson today, and I pray this is not once of them, because we do a disservice when we confuse what happened with Philip with how most Christians stumble into an opportunity to talk about the Faith. Odds are that most of you, on your way home, will not run into an Ethiopian eunuch. And, even if you do, the odds are even more stacked against you that he will be reading from the prophet Isaiah. What happened with Philip was a unique event, but that doesn't mean that any possible encounter you might have with an inquiring soul would be any less of a divine arrangement. It does mean, however, that you can't force such a moment to occur, and I can't expect you all to have them, especially not every day. A Christian is called to be ready to speak, not to be unwilling to put a sock in it, because, when we start to feel pressured to argue people to faith or reason them into the Church, we only win arguments and lose souls, sell our congregation and forfeit the gospel.

Philip was in the right place at the right time by God's arrangement. Philip didn't have to manhandle the conversation. The opportunity presented itself. Philip didn't have to make Jesus appealing. Philip didn't have to prove that he was holy enough to talk about Jesus or perfect enough to recommend religious truth. Philip just told the eunuch the good news about Jesus and let the gospel do the work, confident that, no matter happened, Jesus would still be Jesus and the gospel would still be good news. And you can do the same, because you are a branch of the vine, because you also know what Philip knew. When someone asks you about the Bible, you can answer, "Oh yeah, that is all about Jesus." And you know about Jesus, because Jesus is the heart and core of everything we say, sing, and pray in God's service.

Last year, I thought the irises in front of the parsonage would never come up. I was pretty sure I had killed them somehow. Several members had told me how beautiful they were in the past. I thought, "Great, here I am in a new parish, and I can't even get flowers to grow." I had all but given up on them halfway through the summer, but then they sprung up all of a sudden. Then they flowered, and they were beautiful. We didn't see much life, but the life was in the bulb, and the bulb gave life to the leaves and the flower. Such is the case with Christ and us. So long as the vine is living, there is hope for the branches, and the vine is most certainly alive, and, connected to Him, you will grow and flower in the faith as well.

We can't talk about God's love without Jesus. We can't live the Christian life without Christ. We can't understand the Scriptures unless we understand that they are talking about Jesus. We can't love God as He wants us to love Him until we are told how He has loved us in Christ. We have little evangel, or good news, to evangelize with, if Jesus isn't the heart and core of the news we share. He is the vine. We are the branches.

God is greater than your hearts. When your faith seems too weak, your deeds too trifling, your worship too paltry, your walk too crooked, don't try to make yourself believe more, don't try to manufacture what only God can give. Rather confess your sins and receive from Him what only He can give. Know that God is greater than your hearts and trust in Him who alone can grow life amidst death: God's Son, Jesus Christ. Believe that He is the vine, and there is life in Him, and, through Word and Sacrament, that life can become your own as you draw from Him what you cannot produce on your own.

Christ is your life, and your neighbor's chance for life as well. Should the opportunity arise to spread this life to others, don't worry about coming up with the right words or saying them in just the right way. Just talk about the Jesus you know, who absolves your sin, who feeds you in the Supper, who washes your sins away in Baptism, who speaks peace to you in the midst of confusion and hope in a sea of fear. Don't worry about the words. God has already given them to you. Just speak the creed, not as some rote set of facts, but as the love song faith sings with ever-renewed joy in response to Christ's selfless and timeless love; and Jesus will still be Jesus, and the gospel will still be good news. Amen.