



**May 2, 2021, Worship Sermon**  
**" A Vine Grows in Ethiopia**  
Delivered by Rev. Stephen Keiser

***Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8***

Once I was walking past a playground where a little league baseball team was practicing. All the players on the team were wearing uniforms and they seemed to be having a lot of fun throwing the ball back and forth. Sitting on the ground behind the backstop was a little boy who looked really dejected. He was not wearing a uniform, and he was watching all of the other kids play, and you could tell that he really wanted to join them, but he was not a part of the team. The coach noticed this boy sitting off to the side and he called over to him, "Would you like to play baseball with us?" The boy's face lit up and he shook his head, "Yes!" So, the coach waved him onto the field and began talking with him, I assume about joining the team.

That moment came to mind as I was thinking about the story of Phillip and the Ethiopian man in our reading from Acts. Phillip was one of Jesus' disciples and, among the twelve, he was really good at recruiting people to join the team that Jesus had started. He was like that coach on the baseball field inviting the boy to join the fun. So, it's no surprise that the Holy Spirit chose Phillip to go and speak with someone about becoming a follower of Jesus.

What is surprising in the story is the person that the Holy Spirit directed Phillip to approach. That person was a eunuch and, according to the Bible, eunuchs could not be a part of God's team. It says this right there in Deuteronomy: eunuchs have no place in the assembly of God's people. Eunuchs couldn't have children; they literally couldn't bear fruit. And what did God promise Abraham? Children! A multitude of them! So, if a man was physically injured so that he couldn't have children... well there wasn't much hope that he could be tied into the promise that God had made to Abraham and his descendants.

Based on what Philip should have known about his own religion, he should have said "Absolutely not!" when the eunuch asked to be baptized. But obviously, the Holy Spirit was doing something new. The Holy Spirit was sowing the seeds of life in Christ into soil that had previously been considered barren. Philip did baptize the eunuch and the eunuch carried the Gospel to Ethiopia, where the church has flourished for two thousand years. Long before most of Europe had even heard of Jesus Christ, there were Christians in Ethiopia. As a matter of fact, when Mohammed was being chased out of Saudi Arabia six hundred years after this episode in Acts, he fled to Ethiopia. There, he encountered the spiritual descendants of this eunuch. These Ethiopian Christians showed hospitality to Mohammed and gave him refuge. Because of the kindness showed to him by these Ethiopian Christians, Mohamed respected Christianity and considered it a worthy religion. The vine planted by Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch was still bearing fruit six hundred years later.

This reading from Acts means so much to me because it says that no one is beyond the reach of God's love, even people whom the Bible itself had previously excluded. The Holy Spirit was growing like a vine

stretching its tendrils into new places, spreading its branches to bear the fruit of healing and reconciliation everywhere.

Speaking of vines, Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches." Like a vine spreading out its branches in all directions, Jesus sends us into the world to bear the delicious fruit of God's salvation... just like the Holy Spirit sent Philip down that wilderness road to Gaza.

Vines are very opportunistic. A vine will send its branches over and around just about anything in order to reach into the sunlight. I know this because there is a vine that grows up the masonry in front of the church every year. Sometime in the middle of June, I'll notice the first little tendrils peaking up behind the hedges at the foundation. And every year, I'll procrastinate about pulling down the vine. And three weeks later its branches will stretch all the way up the front of the church to the gutters and we'll have to get a ladder out to pull it down before it damages the masonry.

Vines are opportunistic. They take obstacles and turn them into opportunities for growth. Now if the vine is a weed, like poison ivy, that imperturbable behavior can be a problem. Poison ivy is really hard to get rid of. But the vine we are talking about is life in Jesus Christ, so the vitality and the strength of this life are blessings. Thank God that the Holy Spirit doesn't give up when it encounters an obstacle that prevents it from stretching its branches into the life of a person. No heart is so hard or barren that the vine of Christ cannot stretch its tendrils into it.

During this era of polarization, when there is so much animosity and distrust between different groups of people, I find tremendous hope in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch and in the image of Christ as an imperturbable vine. No matter how much we try to build up walls between people, the Holy Spirit finds a way to reach around the walls we build. Our fear causes us to build these walls... walls that could eventually imprison us. But as it says in our reading from I John, "Perfect love casts out all fear"; and perfect love is what God has for all creation.