

## First Reading: Acts 8:26-40

*Led by the Spirit, Philip encounters an Ethiopian official who is returning to his African home after having been to Jerusalem to worship. Philip uses their encounter to proclaim the gospel to him. Upon coming to faith in Jesus, the Ethiopian is baptized by Philip.*

<sup>26</sup>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.) <sup>27</sup>So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship <sup>28</sup>and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. <sup>29</sup>Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." <sup>30</sup>So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" <sup>31</sup>He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. <sup>32</sup>Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.

<sup>33</sup>In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?

For his life is taken away from the earth."

<sup>34</sup>The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" <sup>35</sup>Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. <sup>36</sup>As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" <sup>38</sup>He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. <sup>39</sup>When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. <sup>40</sup>But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

## Gospel: John 15:1-8

*On the night of his arrest, Jesus taught his disciples about the relationship they would have with him. Those who abide in his word and love would bear fruit, for apart from him, they could do nothing.*

[Jesus said:] <sup>1</sup>"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. <sup>2</sup>He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup>You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup>I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup>Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

A writer once told the story of a purpose of an Orthodox Academy located on the Island of Crete. It was to help to bring reconciliation between people, cultures, and ideas. This getaway location sought to connect people together in their humanity and in one of the earliest conferences held at the place it involved some high-level politicians from France, Germany, and Greece. They were invited, along with their spouses, to come together for some serious dialogue including the goal of addressing feelings of mistrust that existed between the countries and people. After everyone had settled in and mingled informally at the first dinner, the atmosphere was remained little bit tense, the executive director of the academy was concerned about what to do with the unproductive atmosphere. During the night the news was shared that the water system had failed – in this rather new facility. At the morning breakfast, the academy's leader declared the problem had only one solution - it was to organize a bucket brigade from the spring of the nearby monastery to bring water into the Academy storage tank, so that all might be to drink, flush their toilets, and bathe. Because of the remote location, the participants would have to help with the work until the problem was fixed and other help had arrived. Were they willing to do that? The attendees reluctantly agreed, mainly out of necessity of wanting to have running water to meet their needs. Thus, in the hot summer sun, the French, German, and Greeks in shorts and bathing suits, began hauling water. Very quickly they became tired and sweaty and then the inevitable happened. The French began splashing water on each other and the Germans and Greeks joined in. Suddenly whole buckets of water were being thrown, and it was not long before an all-out water battle was going on between the academy and the monastery. No one was exempt, not even the monks of the monastery

or the staff at the Academy. Nationality was forgotten in the good-humored melee. Playful chaos prevailed and best of all, there was laughter. All the sudden wine and beer appeared; and miraculously that night, the water suddenly came back on. The Conference was a success and it went on to find accomplishments and a spirit of lasting reconciliation. The academy director only smiled when asked about such circumstances; and everybody guessed who turn the water off, and then later turned it back on.

Connections, one to another, person to person, heart to heart, soul to soul, we as human beings are wired to be in community with one another. The challenge, of course, in our creation, is that we have let other humanly fashioned barriers and divisions drive us apart from each other. It can be borders, skin color, gender, economic class, education and other real or made up differences.

In 2018, we unquestionably, due to technology, are connected in ways that human beings have never been before. If something happens this morning halfway around the world, many of us in this room can simply reach into our pocket or purse, and have the news pop up on our screens. We have the radio, television, and computer. We have the internet, we have email, we are Facebook and Instagram participants, and that just a few of the tools that are used to instantly connect us to one another. And certainly, this has proven to be in many cases to connect people who probably never would have crossed paths or re-connected, if it wasn't for these technological advances. There is ample evidence from programs like Facebook that demonstrate these instances. I know on my own Facebook page I am not only reconnected with members from past congregations that I've served, but also high school friends, college classmates, and relatives that I have rarely seen. It gives the gifts of answering the question

I wonder whatever happened to this person or what is going on in their lives? And while all of this brings some great joy and great connections, if asked the question: Do I think we are really more connected today than we were 10, 30, or 50 years ago - I think my answer would be that I'm not sure. I may remotely, with my fingertips be able to observe others, but I'm not sure we are authentically more connected with one another. It seems we still want to make sure we control we are around, and who we want to at least hold at arm's length.

One of the powerful stories of the Easter event, is how God goes to extreme measures to bring the Gospel message to the human race. In the story of Jesus Christ, we have the shepherds, the outcasts of society, being the first to hear the announcement of the saviors birth; and then a little time later the Magi, men from different countries and ethnicities, come and pay homage, with gifts and their presence to the newborn King. This is bracketed with the first witnesses of the resurrection, the women, who for the most part are not even named, and often were considered less than their male counterparts. It is these two groups of people that bracket the, birth, death and resurrection of Christ.

When we look at the life of Jesus he dines with the outcasts: the sinners, the prostitutes, the tax collectors. He ministers to a Samaritan woman, he heals a son of a Roman guard, he touches lepers, he chooses a ragtag group of fisherman, zealots, and tax collectors to be in his inner circle. In our first lesson today, again reading from the Acts of the Apostles during the season of Easter, we hear the story of the deacon Philip being led by the Spirit to go out encounter yet another outsider, an Ethiopian, a eunuch, who himself is struggling to understand God in his life and the message of the suffering servant sent in Jesus Christ. And as

Philip opens his eyes to the meaning of Scripture, he is asked to be baptized right then and there because of hearing the good news of Jesus. This story, as it appears in the book the Acts of the Apostles is yet another example of the widening net of the Christian message. It comes just a few verses after a group of Samaritans have received the news of a risen Christ. It comes just before the conversion of Paul, the one who was killing the Christians, and it comes just before the apostle Peter's dream that convinces him that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not just for the Jews exclusively, but for the Gentiles, and the entire world. All the stories remind us of how radically inclusive God's grace is for the world. And while we as humans continue to rank one another in worthiness, or push people to the margins, or look down on others we judge to be less than, we are reminded of a God that pays no attention in terms of love, forgiveness and grace, to these humanly created barriers of acceptance and rejection.

In our gospel text this morning we hear one of the great "I am" statements that come from the very mouth of our Savior. Jesus says: "I am the vine, you are the branches." He also says: "abide in me as I abide in you.". These words of Jesus are about being connected to God, connected to the Messiah, connected to the one who saves us. We, in turn, often get so caught up on which branch is not bearing fruit, and place our focus on what might be thrown away, or die, that we lose the ultimate point that we are connected. We are connected to God and we are connected to each other. How do you view your connection, this day, this hour with the God of the empty tomb, the God that has conquered even death, the God that remains unconditionally connected to us? Also, given our connection as branches to the vine – how do you seek to authentically connect to other children of God? Amen.