

Easter 5

May 2, 2021

Acts 8:26-40

²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south^[a] to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. ²⁷ And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." ³⁰ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² 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 before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth."

³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?"^[a] ³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. ³⁹ And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰ But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

Psalms 22:24-31

²⁴ My praise is of him in the | great assembly;*
I will perform my vows in the presence of those who | worship him.

²⁵ The poor shall eat and be satisfied,
and those who seek the | LORD shall praise him:*

"May your heart | live forever!"

²⁶ All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn | to the LORD,*

and all the families of the nations shall | bow before him.
²⁷ For kingship belongs | to the LORD;*
he rules o- | ver the nations.
²⁸ To him alone all who sleep in the earth bow | down in worship;*
all who go down to the dust | fall before him.
²⁹ My soul shall live for him; my descend- | ants shall serve him;*
they shall be known as the | LORD's forever.
³⁰ They shall come and make known to a people | yet unborn*
the saving deeds that | he has done.

1 John 4:7-21

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

¹³ By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴ And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶ So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. ¹⁷ By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. ¹⁹ We love because he first loved us. ²⁰ If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot^[a] love God whom he has not seen. ²¹ And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

John 15:1-11

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and

burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

Message: The Cilantro Solution

Prayer:

Lord God, You have appointed me as a Pastor and Teacher in Your Church, but you see how unfit I am to meet so great and difficult a task. If I had been without your aid and counsel, I would have ruined everything long ago. Therefore, I call upon You: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you. Use me as Your instrument -- only do not forsake me, for if I am left to myself, I will certainly bring it all to destruction. Amen.

I changed up the prayer that I normally use upon entering the pulpit. I elected to use Luther's prayer because perhaps more than on any other Sunday, I need the intervention of the Holy Spirit. I humbly ask you to bear with me as I struggle through this message, because I have no idea if this is going to make any sense or not. But I'm going to give it my best shot and trust the Holy Spirit to apply it individually as He sees fit.

When I initially read Jesus' parable of the Vine and Branches, I immediately thought about how well I believed I understood the story; I know a lot about pruning! During my undergrad years, I worked for four years as a commercial flower forcer in a green house. Through selective pruning, I learned how to manipulate flowers, especially chrysanthemum plants, into the style and size of blossom that I wanted. The process is based on the well-established and proven horticultural practice that when you prune something, it tends to branch out. I learned that by pruning just the right flower buds at just the right time, I could shape a mum plant into producing either the single, large "homecoming corsage" blossom or a cluster of eight or more smaller blooms.

Prior to this past week, if you had come to me and declared, "Burkhalter, you don't know the first thing about pruning!", I might have simply dismissed you. I might have bristled a bit. I might have even gotten angry, thinking you obviously don't know what you were talking about. Of course I understand pruning! And so, I reckoned, of course I understand this scripture!

But something wasn't right. For years and years, I have struggled unsuccessfully to raise cilantro. Cilantro is a leafy herb that looks much like parsley and is used much like it as well. To add flavor to foods, you take a bunch of the leaves, chop them up and add them to the dish. As the season progresses, the plant begins to develop flowers in preparation for forming next year's seeds. Employing my knowledge of what pruning does, I routinely cut back those developing flowers to force new growth to branch out from those cuts from which I could continue to harvest the leaves.

But inevitably, every year the plants would turn spindly and what few additional leaves it did produce were stunted and sparse, and flower heads seemed to develop at an increasing rate, and our harvest of the desired leaves always dwindled.

This spring Betty and I resolved to skip planting cilantro altogether, blaming our lack of success on the location, the soil, or something else unknown. I mean, I know what I know!

But there is the problem. While I know what I know, I don't know what I don't know. It wasn't until discussing this text with others that the answer became apparent. And it was so simple; it was so basic; if anyone should have recognized it, I should have with my years of pruning experience. But I didn't!

The solution to my problem lies in verse two of our gospel lesson: *Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.*

Here is a technical detail about pruning that God knows that I didn't know: depending on the time within the growing season, when a plant experiences a shock to its system – like pruning off the developing flowering tip – the plant goes into emergency survival mode; not just survival of itself as an individual plant, but the survival of its *kind*. It is as though the plant thinks, "Oh, no! Something has happened to my seed producing process! Must survive; must make more seeds!" And where do the seeds come from? In mum plants and cilantro it's from the flower heads. But in many other plants, the seeds come from the fruit! If you need more seeds or more fruit, you prune it, and Christ Jesus says that's what you'll get!

My problem was that I didn't want the *seeds*; I wanted the leaves! But when I pruned the plants, they did, in fact, branch out, but those additional branches began producing more flowers and seeds, not the leaves that I desired! For years I have been unwittingly, unknowingly setting myself (and my plants) up for failure – according to my perspective!

Was I wrong about pruning? Not necessarily – the plants did, in fact, do what I expected – sort of! They branched out. So, was I right about the pruning? Not necessarily – the plants did not produce what I desired. So was I right or wrong?

The answer is... Yes!

Some things I knew about pruning, but some important aspects of the practice escaped me. But I was ultimately responsible for what happened to those plants!

So here's my point: Over the past year we have struggled here at Mission in Christ with conflicting understandings of the Covid crisis and conflicting understandings of what constitutes good, preventative protocols and practices. Advocates of both sides are strongly convinced that they are the ones in the right, and that the other is grossly, even sinfully in error. Which one is right?

Is the answer like the answer to the pruning question? Is it, 'Yes'?

Maybe. In one of the prayers of the Compline liturgy, the confession is made that "some of my sins I know, but some is known only to you". Should it be the case that you and I might like to plead innocent of such unknown sins, the prayer continues, that they are "by my fault, by my own fault, by my own most grievous fault". The repetition intends to prevent us from avoiding responsibility.

Maybe the answer lies somewhere in between. Maybe the answer lies in somethings known only to God. I still believe that my understanding is correct, and maybe it is. Others still believe that their understandings are correct, and maybe they are. But maybe our respective knowing is also incomplete. If I could simultaneously be so right and so wrong about cilantro, is it possible I could be right and wrong about proper Covid protocol? We may know what we know, but we still do not know what we do not know!

The promise for us lies beyond our individual "knowing". The promise is that God is faithful and just and forgives us all of our sins – known and unknown – for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Some of our sin we know, but some is truly known only to God – remember the cilantro!

Thanks be to God.

Prayers of the Church

Let us pray to our victorious Savior on behalf of the Church, the world, and all people.

A brief silence

Lord Jesus, thank you for cutting us from our tree of death and grafting us to yourself, the Living Vine. Give us courage: your Father's pruning shears frighten us at times! Give us faith: he prunes us to bear much fruit in you! Give us love: it is the sweetest fruit of your blessed vine.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Grant that your holy Church may always abide in you, and you in it. Make it fruitful in words of faith and hope, and deeds of love. Through its witness, graft many souls to yourself.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Give to your persecuted servants the knowledge that through their faithful endurance, they will bear rich fruit that refreshes and nourishes many hearts – perhaps even their enemies'.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

You are the vine, and we are the branches. Keep the people of this congregation united to you and to one another. Help our ministries to bear much fruit in the lives of those around us. Give us joy in knowing and serving you, our Savior and Brother.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Bless and direct everyone learning the way of being your disciple. May their patient friendship, walking alongside those who do not yet know you well, bear much fruit. Use them to kindle or renew faith in many hearts.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Prune the hearts of our earthly rulers. Cut away the greed, pride, and lust for power that leads to hatred and violence. Build up all that enriches the lives of the poor and humble. Let the desire to do your Father's will abide in all our hearts and minds.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

You have overcome the world. Be the joy and strength of all those who defend us against violence, sickness, and injustice. Protect and guide them.

Prosper all they do that works for peace and health. Bring them home safely and soon.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Grant to all who suffer a double portion of your Spirit, especially Dean Puffett, the VansCoy family, Johnny Feulner, Dolores Rodela, Mary Ann Helmricks, Mary Rathe, Amy Cooper, Cathie Littlefield, Pr. David Steffensen, and Pr. David Schaffer. Fill them with your life. Keep them steadfast in faith. Bless and strengthen all who care for them.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Lord Jesus, death shall never have the last word over those who abide in you. Thank you for speaking words of forgiveness and life to all who have died in you. Abide with us. Lead us to that place where we shall dwell with you and with all the redeemed, and shall feast at your heavenly Table forever.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**