

Sermon for 2 May 2021 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Fifth Sunday after Easter

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

### ***“Pruning”***

I've told you I'm in a retired clergy group that's reading former President Barack Obama's new book, "A Promised Land," which is about his start in politics and up through his first Presidential term. He's quite candid. He says that when people would come up to him and say, "You were just meant for this moment," that, even though he was pretty sure he wanted to run and grateful for all the support his campaign received, "I've never been very strong on destiny...you just do the best you can with what you've got..." and yet when the tense times came, he felt a sense of movement in the country and in himself. He says he was never much for rabbit's feet or lucky charms ... but people began to hand him things precious to them, and when time came for a big speech or a tense vote, he found himself picking out one or two items and carrying them in his pocket awhile.

I thought about this when I looked over this wide variety of scriptures today, all selected because of some point about the Easter message, but so widely divergent in their origin, or the point they make, or the person we think they came from.

The strongest surprise comes, for lots of us, with the selection from the psalter. We tend to identify Psalm 22 with its first section, and the tradition that Jesus uttered it on the Cross: "My God, my God! Why hast thou forsaken me?" It startles us to remember that the whole character of Psalm 22 changes after that first part, as evidenced by what we read today: "From you comes my praise in the great congregation." This is Eastertide, and Psalm 22's joy is there for us to employ in our worship together.

My point is from personal experience. The Bible says all kinds of things to me. Not only does it hit me from "left field" when I'm ready for a home run or at least hoping for some guidance, seeming to let me down when I most need advice and encouragement. It just has its own agenda, and like life itself, presents me with off-the-wall ideas, sometimes.

Here's this Ethiopian eunuch, a highly regarded stranger reading Hebrew scripture on an isolated highway ... we assume it wasn't like using his cell phone, distracting his driving ... And here's Philip, picked up and dropped off with the impulse to address him and then to answer his questions ... and then, once he's baptized the man, to hie himself off in another direction. What kind of impulse control is going on here, on both sides? Holy Spirit, off the wall, not just helping me settle down and get some rest, or settle an argument between church members. Strange. Can I depend on instinct? Is it OK to think so, and then be mistaken sometimes?

And then John's letter, imploring the church to get along ... not to like each other, but to love one another .... And forcing us to face the difference, which never leaves church fellowship. As Vivian put on our outside marquee awhile back, "It's not what you say, but what you do, that

counts.” Our last two “Joys and concerns” times have taught us more about that than a month of sermons, as we’ve heard and spoken hard truths and gone home with more to think about than generations of Sundays have produced, God help us! Forgiveness, and spontaneous speaking, and prayerful going forth together but separately, are all a part of being joined in love.

Where do all these stimuli come from? With fifty days between Easter and Pentecost to get the point of resurrection across in the Jesus narrative, it’s not enough to have a clear story line. The movement didn’t grow simply, or even easily or comfortably. I was stunned this week to learn, from one of the on-line courses I’m always taking, that the Jews were a big part of the population in the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world in Jesus’ day... in the millions ... and lots of things were going on besides this story that means the world to us. The Romans were applying empirical tactics far beyond the Jesus story, insisting their emperor must be treated godlike, wiping out the temple in Jerusalem as one of the wonders of the ancient world because it represented resistance to empire.

The most powerful idea in today’s lessons, for me, to get back to our main theme, is in the Gospel lesson. We’ve said John’s Gospel has Jesus more godlike, certain of himself, unhindered, speaking from “on high,” than the other three biographies of Christ... maybe because John’s church was being persecuted so harshly, and so long after the first Easter hopefulness. In today’s text, the most striking insight for our present situation is the description of God as a vinegrower who applies standard techniques to raise good grapes. A big part of life in Christ, life with God Almighty, involves pain, disappointment, not knowing... All these ideas that have been gathered from far away, all this confusion in the church and in politics, that are so daily real to us and the rest of our world .... All this Bible and all this life and death right here and now, can in at least some ways be treated as pruning for growth, hope for fruit, life instead of death.

Pruning.

Like parents do at times... and teachers ... and leaders of all kinds, even in a marriage or friendship.

Like disciples who know how to work ... but know equally that they’re not in charge.

Let us pray.

Dear God in heaven, thank you. Teach us to mean that, and to say it often. You’re in charge. Amen.