

Easter 5b 2024
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
April 28, 2024
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem
Acts 8:26-40 Psalm 22:24-30 1 John 4:7-21 John 15:1-8

Last week we celebrated Jesus the Good Shepherd; we recall that shepherding is a job that requires great commitment: “the shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” In fact, shepherding is more than a job, more than a task; for Jesus, shepherd is one of the characteristics of who he is. Jesus the good shepherd did lose his life for us, his sheep. Jesus’ statement “I am the Good Shepherd” framed our worship last Sunday.

Today we continue hearing one of Jesus’ “I AM” statements. In total, there are seven “I AM” statements in the Gospel of John.

- I am the Bread of Life (John 6:35) ...
- I am the Light of the World (John 8:12) ...
- I am the Door (John 10:9) ...
- I am the Good Shepherd (John 10:11-14) ...
- I am the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25) ...
- I am the Way and the Truth and the Life (John 14:6) ... and today,
- I am the Vine (John 15:1-5)

The wording of Jesus’ “I AM” statements here is the same as the “I AM” statements that God says to Moses in the book of Exodus (3:13-14). We are meant to connect the God of Moses to the God of Jesus; the gospel is drawing a line to emphasize to us that there is one God. One.

Then we have instructions, if you will, on how to be a disciple of Jesus: “Abide in me as I abide in you.” Okay! But what does that mean, exactly, to abide in Jesus? In one sense, abiding is about making our home somewhere, living. Live in Jesus and Jesus lives in us. However, to abide carries much more meaning than to live somewhere. To abide has to do with persevering and sticking with something. Persevere in Jesus as Jesus perseveres in us. Stick with Jesus, not just because things are going well or that we find a church at which the service time lines up with our preferred sleep schedule, or that the right people go there, but stick with Jesus up to the point of dying for him. Live with Jesus all along the way. Shepherds live with their sheep. Vintners often live in their vineyards at harvest time because the timing and immediacy of harvesting the grapes is that critical. We are to be that connected to the vine of Christ.

To add humility to abiding, Jesus reminds us that we can do nothing without him. Nothing! That means that sticking with Jesus is what gives us life. We cannot live as single cut off branches; we will wither and die. We are the branches on a vine that God creates, and anything that we do, have, or accomplish initiates not with ourselves, but with God. “I am the vine; you are the branches.” Together, we are the church.

There are many messages in Philip’s story and interaction with a royal eunuch. From a “where are we in church history view,” the apostle Stephen has been stoned to death after infuriating the council of the synagogue. A man named Saul (who we know as the epistle writer and Christian named Paul), is “ravaging” the church, dragging people from their homes, imprisoning them and persecuting them for their faith in Jesus Christ. Christians begin to scatter, to escape from this persecution in Jerusalem. This is in about the thirties in the New Testament.

At this time, the apostle Philip has traveled to Samaria. He is wildly popular there. (Acts 8: there was great joy in the city [after some of his healings]). It is an angel, a messenger of God, who tells Philip to go south on a wilderness road. This is not just any wilderness road; it is just about at the end of the world. One writer describes the area as being the end of the world. If it not the end of the world, he writes, you can certainly see it from there (Martin Marty, Center for Excellence in Preaching). In that remote place, the Spirit compels Peter to meet a person we might also say is “way out there.” The person we call “the Ethiopian Eunuch” is an officer of a royal court. That he is in a chariot with room for a passenger indicates that he is financially prosperous. Such

court officers often had wealth and power. Philip, we remember, is a fisherman, now “fishing” in the name of Jesus. The Ethiopian is a person of wonder and mystery to this Gallilean fisherman. But he’s reading familiar Scripture, a passage from Isaiah, and through that common word, they connect. Peter teaches him about Jesus and baptizes him in the name of Jesus. Welcome to the newest Christian – a foreigner and a Gentile.

From Jerusalem to Samaria to the ends of the earth ... we remember that Jesus tells his disciples (Acts 1:8), “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Christianity is moving out of the synagogue and into the world, just as Jesus said.

How do we continue to spread Christianity in and beyond the walls of this building? How do we introduce God to someone? First, we must spend time in the Word, in prayer, worship, and the bible. You may be aware of how often Bishop Daniel tells us to “get in the Word.” This past week he wrote a little about what happens when we spend time with scripture:

You have done well and begun to make choices in concert with the guidance of the Church's teachings and regular readings from the Bible. You pray and ask God for help. You are beginning to understand God's ways and will.

We must put ourselves in places in which we are ready to read, learn, and listen. And we do not carry out this practice only in solitude; that is when we become that disconnected branch that readily falls further and further from the true vine. We gather, look at Scripture, tradition, and reason, and we do the fruitful work of discerning – God’s word, our place, our path. We may discover that we are starving for God, for belonging.

Know deep in your spirit that you belong here. You belong. And it is only when we are fed that we can offer the finest fruit to someone else. Here, it’s the best – and we awaken the heart and the hunger of another. All along the way, when we abide in Jesus, we exude joy, peace, generosity, and a welcoming spirit. “I want what she has. What he has.” And the hunger has been awakened. Like Philip, we show up and tell the story. Do you know it? Yes, you really do.

When we hear: “How can I, unless someone guides me?” Tell a story about someone who guides you.

“How can I?” gives you an opportunity to tell of a time in which you found that through God, all things are possible.

When you recognize that someone is feeling like an outsider, tell a story about a time when you felt like an outsider. Tell the story ... about how you moved from feeling like an outsider to knowing that you were not and are not ever outside of the love of God. And that in baptism, we are marked, with sight and sound and water and oil, touch and smell – marked as God’s own, forever. Tell the story ... about how God will never let us go, even when we let go of God.

The gospel will not be hidden. It even shows up at the end of the world. And in Samaria. And in Greenville, SC. Philip went out and showed an outsider the love of God in Christ, bringing his reading to a way of understanding and of life. We do not know Jesus just in this place, but in everywhere we are. We remember from a few weeks ago, if not long ago, that “witness” is who we are. We witness in all that we do and say – and in the ways in which we keep silent, stay away, or practice indifference. We are witnesses. Our lives show the world how we love. Our lives show people of mystery and wonder, people we historically hate, people we know and do not know, how we function in the world when we abide in Jesus Christ.

Let this be the week in which we experience Jesus as the good shepherd, and the true vine, and the week in which we begin to get curious about how we might share the story in a way that is consonant with who we are and whose we are. And the gospel will not be hidden. *Amen.*

Almighty and everliving God, ruler of all things in heaven and earth, hear our prayers for this parish family. Strengthen the faithful, arouse the careless, and restore the penitent. Grant us all things necessary for our common life, and bring us all to be of one heart and mind within your holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*