

## **Fifth Sunday of Easter** April 29

As we draw closer to the end of the Easter season, the readings start to look forward to Pentecost as much as they are flowing out from the Easter event. It is rather like walking between two great lights. As you move away from one toward the other, the light cast by each grows or diminishes in relative brightness, but they don't actually disappear.

Today we will see the Deacon Philip witnessing to the Ethiopian Eunuch. We also hear John urging us to test the spirits and live in love. Then, Jesus speaks of our connection to him as branches to a vine. If you just glance at the readings, these three readings don't appear to have much connection to one another. But a second look reveals the fact we have come to the tipping point of the two great lights which stand at either end of this season of Easter. We are talking about the resurrected Christ. We also start to see a Spirit-filled Deacon and Jesus speaking to us of a relationship which is built on the work of the Spirit. As we have crossed the threshold of Easter's midpoint, Pentecost's light is starting to diffuse through these readings.

The readings today can be heard to speak about the whole human being engaged in the Christian experience. While John enjoins us to use our heads and hearts to test the spirits, I think John is far more concerned about the potency of those spirits than he is concerned about their doctrinal rectitude. The right doctrine is important because it potently affects the Christian's life. His immediate leap into the Christian life would suggest that the right spirit does something to the life of the hearer.

There is another thread running through these readings which connects them. The texts really deny us the bifurcations which frequently demand our allegiance. Some would have us think that our lives are simply reduced to the physical things. Others would suggest that we are but spiritual beings temporarily encased in a body but waiting our true salvation, the liberation from the physical to pure spiritual essence. Neither of these poles reflects Scripture and these readings do a really nice job of this. The Ethiopian Eunuch is reading an Old Testament passage and Philip starts to explain the message to him, and then they get out of that chariot and enter the physical water to be baptized. Jesus uses a very agricultural metaphor, describing a physical connection between the vine and its branches, suggesting that is how we are connected to Him. John moves from a doctrinal assertion to the embodied manifestation of that doctrine in love. The preacher may want, this day, to remind the hearers that God has died a real and physical death, been bodily raised, he has redeemed your heart, your mind, your whole being and that means that the whole person has been enlisted in the kingdom task. He loves it when you think about what you are doing. He loves it when you feel his presence. He loves it when you work hard. He loves it when you rest and simply dwell in his presence. These things are not in competition with each other, they are not valued one over another. Each may be more or less appropriate for the situation we face at the moment, but the whole person is engaged here.

## Collect of the Day

O God, You make the minds of Your faithful to be of one will. Grant that we may love what You have commanded and desire what You promise, that among the many changes of this world our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

*This is going to take us a bit to think through this. Our culture approaches the will from a very different perspective than the Scriptures and our Lutheran faith. What does it mean for us that God makes us all of one will? Why is that important? What does it actually mean when Christianity is so divided into denominations and traditions? Did you know there are some 30,000 denominations registered in the U. S? What exactly is the human will? How can we assert that minds of God's faithful are one in will when we cannot even get along with our fellow Lutherans, let alone the rest of Christendom? And yet, we are of one will. Every one of those Christians, no matter what their theological predispositions and conclusions, they all want to see Christ. They pray to him, they love him, and they count on him.*

*So what is the unity of the will? We pray in the Lord's Prayer that his will, not ours be done. Is the unity of will found not in our will but in God's? Perhaps we really need to ask just what the will of which this prayer speaks is. Is will a feeling/desire? Is it a common faith? But faith is both a thing which we believe and a subjective believing of that body of belief. And even that seems to fall short, for faith is the relationship with Jesus in which he is Savior, my Savior, and I am his beloved, in need of that salvation.*

*So what is this unity of will? The prayer asserts that this unity already exists. We pray for love and we pray for a rightly ordered desire, but the will seems to be already in place. What is that will? Is it the man whom God has raised up out of the waters of Baptism? There is indeed an old stinker who clings closely to us, a competing will which bedevils us until the day we die. But is this prayer really looking at the man whom God has raised up from that water? Often I think we don't take that newness of the person seriously. We are quick to point to the old man who is still there, but do we with equal vigor point to the new man? Are we so dependent upon what we see that we define the human being by what we see, and we always see the old stinker? Do we ever talk to the new man? Do we ever just ignore the old man and just talk to the new man in the same way that we will sometimes address the old man and call him to repentance? If we would understand the unified will, do we need to start seeing and talking to that new man? After all, the old stinker is the guy who is least likely to listen.*

*We ask God here to give us, grant to us, a gift. The gift is that we love what He has commanded and desire what he has promised. This is not the first time this has shown up for us. There are a couple of interesting ways to think about this. Are we asking to love his commandments in the way that the Psalmist speaks of loving the law of God? Or are we looking forward to loving the things that God has commanded us to love? This would be the neighbor and the sinner, the people and things which Christ has redeemed and loved himself and now commanded us to love.*

*Of course the biggest command to love and perhaps the hardest is that we love God as Moses and Jesus tell us. This is something of an oxymoron. How can one command love? If you love because you obey the command, is it really love? I use this illustration with my students: Imagine that a young man comes to his girlfriend and gives her a dozen roses and she says "Thank you!" If he follows that up with, "I am only doing my duty" he had better be ready to run. If we love God out of duty it is no love. Roses given out of duty are a lie. The roses speak of love but love which is an obliged love is not really love.*

*Then, the prayer looks forward to us desiring what God promises. This at first sounds like a "duh!" of course we are going to look forward to a promise, but think about this. God promises us eternal perfect life. Much of our world thinks that such a life would be crushingly boring. This is a failure of imagination on their part, but it is a very real failure. Many an author has successfully depicted heaven as really boring, do our people really look forward to it? They know they are supposed to, but have we preached heaven in a way which makes them want to go? Yes, the whole no sickness, no death, no sorrow thing is good, but it is negatively said. We describe it by what it is not. What exactly is it? This is hard. If you struggle with this, you might just read C. S. Lewis' Perelandra. There he describes what he imagines the Garden of Eden to have been like on another planet before the fall into sin. The protagonist is there to stop that world from falling into sin as ours did. I won't ruin it and tell you if he succeeded or not.*

*Of course heaven is just one of the promises we have to look forward to. How about being sinless? Our world has successfully connected sin with fun. Do we really look forward to being sinless? Jesus has promised us that he is always with us. Do we really want him hanging around? I remember my wife and I wincing when Garrison on Lake Wobegon once described the relief that everyone felt when they found out that Pastor was not going the cruise they were all planning together. Do we really want Jesus hanging around all the time?*

*But this gift of love and desire is important. Our world changes very rapidly, and Christ gives us a solid rock on which to stand and anchor our life. Amid all these changes we need something that does not change, that would be Jesus. We need that stability, that unchanging nature of Jesus in order to have true joy. Change is good, but it also introduces a measure of discomfort to our lives. It is a result of the fall, in a sense. We have to learn to adapt and live with it, but that is only possible when something does not change. There are those who would propose that that only thing that does not change is the reality of change. But that is a nihilism, a despair of sorts. It lacks hope.*

*Jesus offers us true joy. How would you describe that for your people?*

## **Readings**

Acts 8:26-40

<sup>25</sup> Now when they had testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.

<sup>26</sup> Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” This is a desert place. <sup>27</sup> 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 <sup>28</sup> and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. <sup>29</sup> And the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over and join this chariot.” <sup>30</sup> So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” <sup>31</sup> And he said, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with 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 before its shearer is silent,  
so he opens not 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> And the eunuch said to Philip, “About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” <sup>35</sup> Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. <sup>36</sup> 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?” <sup>38</sup> And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. <sup>39</sup> 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. <sup>40</sup> But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

*I have included the verse which immediately precedes this text. The outline of Acts which Luke gives us in 1:8 suggests that the Gospel will be preached in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. The persecution of Saul has driven the Christians out of the comfort of Jerusalem and into the surrounding area. The Samaritans have heard and believed and the apostles have confirmed this. It is Peter and John who return to Jerusalem preaching the Gospel in the Samaritan villages after confirming the conversion of many Samaritans. Our text today really is the opening of that last portion of the book of Acts, the Gospel being preaching to the ends of the Earth. Interestingly, the first Gentile convert seems to have been an African of Ethiopia. Not long ago we heard of the slaughter of Ethiopian Christians at the hands of ISIS, we may want to remember their long and deep history in Christianity. How will we help them?*

*This text has occasioned many questions for us over the years. Here are some of the things we took away from this passage:*

1. *God has a heart for people who might surprise us. Who surprises us today? Bruce (now Caitlyn) Jenner? Rioters in some city? Liberal, Conservative, everyone? Praise team and liturgical worshipers. Yes, even folks who don't agree with me about the presence of Christ in the Sacrament. Satan would divide us, but Jesus unites us.*
2. *Jesus used this same passage when he cleansed the temple. This must have been scandalous when Jesus did it, and this is Jesus cleansing and opening that "temple" for all. As Paul wrote the temple Jesus builds is made of the people whom God has cemented together – Ephesians 2.*
3. *The Eunuch's words are really potent – how can I understand without a guide. We cannot force ourselves on people. He asked Philip, Philip did not force himself on him. We build the relationship first and then the opportunity comes.*
4. *The Eunuch asked Philip in his chariot, into his world. For a Jewish guy to get into that chariot would have meant a ritual uncleanness. Philip had to enter his world.*
5. *God can sometimes sneak up on us or others, through people, even me. Some years ago, one of us had been given a chance to meet with a Chinese doctor who is struggling with Christianity, her husband is Christian. What happened with that conversation? I don't know, but the Spirit of God was there.*
6. *The collect of the day plays in here. Philip loved the one whom God commanded him to love. He desired the unity which God promised him, even with this Ethiopian. And thereby their wills were united. Philip and the Ethiopian were on the same page. What kept him from baptism? Nothing. Here is water, let's do it!*

*This is a marvelous text with an incredible preaching opportunity. Philip is a Deacon, this is not the apostle Philip but the deacon Philip who is chosen with Stephen in chapter six of Acts. Diaconal preachers need to keep this one in their back pocket when clerical types challenge if they should be in pulpits or at baptismal fonts or altar rails. They also need to remember that Philip knew his theology very well.*

*The Spirit puts Philip on the road which lead to Gaza and from there, along the southeastern rim of the Mediterranean Sea into Egypt and the rest of Africa. He encounters a man in a chariot, a high official of the queen of Ethiopia. He appears to have been the secretary of the treasury for that kingdom. He had been in Jerusalem, presumably to make a sacrifice on behalf of his queen. This is important, because as a high official in the presence of a female monarch, he was a eunuch. This was a common practice in the ancient world which we may find appalling and barbaric, but we need to lay aside some of our reaction.*

*The Old Testament had said that a man who has been castrated, a eunuch, was not allowed in the temple. He could make a sacrifice, but it had to be done by someone else on his behalf. Coming from Jerusalem where he had come to worship, but not been allowed into the temple itself, he was found reading Isaiah. Had he purchased the scroll for his queen? Was it already*

*part of the royal library? Philip asks him if he understands what he is reading and gets an invitation to join him in the chariot for a little seminar in theology. He is reading Isaiah 53, the great passage which describes the suffering servant. Philip uses this as a launching pad to describe Jesus.*

*What is implied but not explicitly stated is that Philip started right here, but he did not stay here in this chapter of Isaiah. It says he went on from there. He almost certainly must have gone ahead a couple of chapters, to chapter 56.*

<sup>1</sup>Thus says the LORD: "Keep justice, and do righteousness, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.

<sup>2</sup>Blessed is the man who does this,  
and the son of man who holds it fast,  
who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it,  
and keeps his hand from doing any evil."

<sup>3</sup>Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the LORD say,  
"The LORD will surely separate me from his people";  
and let not the eunuch say,  
"Behold, I am a dry tree."

<sup>4</sup>For thus says the LORD:"To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,  
who choose the things that please me  
and hold fast my covenant,

<sup>5</sup> I will give in my house and within my walls  
a monument and a name  
better than sons and daughters;  
I will give them an everlasting name  
that shall not be cut off.

<sup>6</sup>"And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,  
to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD,  
and to be his servants,  
everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it,  
and holds fast my covenant—

<sup>7</sup> these I will bring to my holy mountain,  
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;  
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices  
will be accepted on my altar;  
for my house shall be called a house of prayer  
for all peoples."

<sup>8</sup>The Lord GOD,  
who gathers the outcasts of Israel, declares,

"I will gather yet others to him  
besides those already gathered."

*If you are thinking of preaching this Acts passage you will want to carefully read the first section of this 56<sup>th</sup> chapter passage too. Therein Isaiah describes the inclusive love of God. He will love everyone who honors the LORD's day and worships him. The foreigner will be included. Even the eunuch will be given a place in the kingdom of God. He is not childless. He is included in the covenant promise as well. God gathers the outcasts, even Ethiopian Eunuchs.*

*This must have been absolutely transformative for this man who had sacrificed so much, permanently. He had just experienced Jewish worship in which he was excluded from full participation because of a reality he could not change, both his ethnicity and his physical state precluded his participation in the temple. Isaiah proclaimed that God would gather together all the outcasts and they shall receive a name that shall not be "cut off." That phrase must have had a special significance for this man.*

*There remains in Ethiopia today a Christian community which is ancient and proud, which claims roots which extend back to the Queen of Sheba and this Eunuch from the court of Candace. There was an interesting article in the National Geographic a number of years ago about these people. They carve marvelous churches out of the soft stone of the region and claim that in one of them resides the original Ark of the Covenant. Of course, they also don't allow visitors inside to verify this claim.*

*The church is rather moribund and many Ethiopians seek answers in other traditions, including other Christian groups and Islam. Today there are more Lutherans in Ethiopia than there are in the United States, at the last count that I heard it was just over 7 million Lutheran in Ethiopia, primarily among the Amharic and Oromo people groups. We have several émigré Lutheran communities here in the Northwest which continue to worship in these ancient languages and cultures. If there is one in your area, you might just consider asking someone from those communities to come and speak at your church.*

Psalm 150

Praise the LORD!

Praise God in his sanctuary;

praise him in his mighty heavens!

<sup>2</sup> Praise him for his mighty deeds;

praise him according to his excellent greatness!

<sup>3</sup> Praise him with trumpet sound;

praise him with lute and harp!

<sup>4</sup> Praise him with tambourine and dance;

praise him with strings and pipe!

<sup>5</sup> Praise him with sounding cymbals;  
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

<sup>6</sup> Let everything that has breath praise the LORD!  
Praise the LORD!

*This psalm is important because it is the very last one in the hymnal. The ancients always thought that the last words of a book would stick in your memory and so they often put important things right at the end. Here we have a “hallelujah!” to end it all. It is a good Easter thing to say. But notice the very last verse as well. Every living thing praises the LORD. The Ethiopian Eunuch, the descendants of tree worshiping Saxons such as this author, and former cannibals in the Highlands of New Guinea. The Church always sees every human being, even those who scream hate and violence against us, as the precious children of God. We would delight to see any of them included in the ranks of those who praise the LORD. We look forward to that day, in fact.*

*The news is always filled with violence, often religiously motivated violence lately. Boko Haram is kidnapping school girls and slaughtering Christians. We also hear of Christian militias in Africa slaughtering Moslem communities. We applaud the efforts of government to protect people from violence and persecution, especially persecution which is rooted in some religious prejudice. But at the same time, we also have to admit that the solutions which are offered by military force will never add one person to the ranks of those who praise God nor to the ranks of those who work for human flourishing. Such solutions are always external and temporary. When the soldiers are called to a new place, they violence will resume unless there is a change of heart. All that military force can possibly do is arrest bloodshed and keep violent people from acts of violence. The heart which harbored that violence and the life which acted it out will not really be changed that way. It is only love, the love of God for sinners, which changes human lives. How will we express that today to these our enemies? How will we be the instruments of God’s love for “them.”*

*It is God’s call to us to be that love. It is God’s desire to save even them. We cannot shrug our shoulders and turn away. Jesus loves all. We cannot say that we are afraid that they will kill us, Jesus faced death and broke is bond for us. His resurrection promises that no death will ever have mastery over us. We cannot say that there is no hope for such a change. Saul of Tarsus and the countless other conversion stories which occupy our Christian narrative speak of the power of God’s love to change people. There is a good chance that there is a Moslem community in your neighborhood, it may be small, but if you are in any metropolitan area, they are there. How have you loved them? How else will they join us in this psalm and its Hallelujah?*

I John 4:1-11 (12-21)

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. <sup>2</sup> By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, <sup>3</sup> and every spirit that



does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. <sup>4</sup> Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. <sup>5</sup> They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. <sup>6</sup> We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

<sup>7</sup> Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.

<sup>13</sup> By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

<sup>14</sup> And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

<sup>15</sup> Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup> 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 love God whom he has not seen. <sup>21</sup> And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.

*John is making some important connections for us today. Test the spirits, he begins. This has some important ramifications for us. First of all, this means that the spirits are not all good spirits. For the past two hundred years or so, post-Enlightenment modernity has been telling us that spirits are nothing but superstition, ghost stories only good for scaring young campers. That is starting to change as people realize that the narrative of reductive materialism (the idea that there is nothing real but the physical) is starting to erode. People are far more open to the idea that there is a spiritual realm which is just as real as the physical realm, and that those realms are inextricably intertwined. But recently rediscovering the validity of the spiritual realm has not given us wisdom. We have a certain sense running round today that spirituality is automatically good. It simply is not so. There is a great deal of spirituality which is not only not good, it can be downright evil. Christians will do well to remember that our enemy can clothe himself in light. That is what Lucifer means after all. My missionary friends at CU and elsewhere are all keenly aware of this. Their experiences in India, Africa, and elsewhere have given them a very healthy*

*fear/respect of the spiritual realm. John is not speaking of some first century metaphor here. This is a real world in which real good and real evil are to be found.*

*The test is a simple one. Jesus has come in the flesh. That sounds almost like nonsense to us. After all, could the evil spirit simply lie to us and admit that Jesus came in the flesh? Yes, of course. But John is not talking about simply a propositional truth here. He is talking about a reality which one cannot simply fake. Confessing Jesus in the flesh is about love, you see. That means we really and actually love, in the flesh. The devil cannot fake that, you see. He is genuinely stupid about love. He can only see people as something to devour, to consume, to use, to be destroyed. He cannot fake love that way, not that one can believe it.*

*This love is the very nature of God and that God dwells in us and he is stronger than the one who dwells in the world. We love one another as an expression of the God who abides within us, he is loving when we love. This is a very sacramental understanding of the human relationship to God. We are not merely reflecting our faith in God as though we were some mirror which has chosen to reflect God. God himself is acting through our acts of loving kindness shown to one another. When I give the cup of cold water to the child, he is both in the child who drinks it and in me, the person giving the cup of cold water.*

*This love, this perfect love which is not from our own hearts but is from God, this love drives out all fear. Fear, Satan's great tool, is incompatible with love. In much of American Christianity we have located the distinction between the saved and the unsaved in the human will. LCMS Lutherans are hardly immune from this cultural pressure upon us. Many of my parishioners saw the difference between them and their hell-bound neighbors as primarily a difference of the right ordering of the will. This is what is going on when the Christian preacher on TV calls for a decision. The difference between you and a person going to hell is what you decide, your willful action. But that simply locates my salvation back inside me. The difference between me and the guy who is damned is not what I have done. We both deserve the down escalator at the end of time. There is another way to say this and another way to think about this. The perfection of which John speaks is not a perfection of the will, but it is a perfection of love, a real and physical deed, a perfection which God works in us, despite us, but which he works within us nonetheless. Its root is found not in me or my will, but in Him and His cross. It is Jesus himself who abides in me and who acts through me. (At this point read the Gospel lesson if you need to hear Jesus say this.)*

*Indeed, the fear which drives the introspection of the holiness bodies and the Pentecostals is the complete opposite of what John is speaking about. The question is never whether we have been completely repentant or converted, by an act of our will. Nor is it whether we have spoken in tongues or otherwise manifest some preternatural gift of the Spirit. The real question is always focused upon what Christ has done for us, to us, and through us. This perfect love applied to my life drives out that fearful question and empowers me with His love in real act. I don't look inside myself to see if I am saved (subjective justification) I look outside myself (objective*

*justification) to see my Savior and my salvation. That salvation has, however, come inside me, and has worked potently within me. I am able to love with God's perfect love because he has put it in there.*

*The preacher might just tell the story of Martin of Tours. His is Dr. Luther's namesake, after all. He was a soldier in the Roman Empire in the 400's or so. He wore a heavy military cloak, designed to wrap around a soldier as he stood on guard. One day, seeing a freezing leprous beggar beside the road he cut the cloak in two and shared half with the beggar. That night Jesus appeared to him in a dream, wearing half the cloak. The really fun question is which half Jesus wore. Did he wear the half that Martin gave to the beggar or was he wearing the half which Martin kept? The question really is whether Jesus was found in the beggar whom Martin helped or was Jesus in Martin as he helped his fellow man?*

*I think the proper answer is both. Jesus abides us when we love. When we preach the presence of Christ in us, we are putting Jesus in both the one who loves and the one loved. And God is love, and that means love happens.*

*Here is a really fun little historical factotum to attach to this story. About 400 years after Martin died, the Christians of Europe believed that they had half of this cloak. The emperor Charlemagne built a whole shrine just to house it so the pilgrims who came to pray before this relic could do so out of the elements. This church came to be known by the name of the relic which it contained, the cloak. But in Latin the word for this cloak is "chapel." This site was so popular that shrines everywhere came to be known as "chapels." Today students at CU are invited to attend chapel on a daily basis, but I would guess almost none of them are aware of this connection. I have no idea how to work this into a proclamation of the Gospel, but I bet I could figure one out if pressed.*

John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. <sup>9</sup> *As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.* <sup>10</sup> *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. <sup>11</sup> These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*

*(For much of this material, I am indebted to a former regular participant in the Tuesday discussions, Ed St. John. He is the director of marketing for the winery operated by his wife's family, Pedroncelli of Sonoma, CA. They are both viticulturists and vintners. That means they both raise the grapes and produce the wine. The grape growing and wine making insights below reflect his expertise, not mine. The errors therein belong to me.)*

*Jesus is the true vine and we are branches. This is a metaphor that simply begs to be developed. Jesus is referring to a grape vine, one of the agricultural backbones of the ancient Mediterranean economy, along with wheat and olives. Everyone would have known this metaphor. The grape cluster was perhaps one of the most common artistic motifs in Roman Empire houses.*

*In the wine business, the quality of the root stock is incredibly important. Vines are certified and grafted into root stock which has been specially treated and grown just be wine grape rootstock. This was an ancient process as well, the people of Jesus' time would have known about grafting grape vines. The grafting process is quite skill dependent. When Jesus says he is the true vine, this is important to the quality of the grape, there are vines which produce true flavors and quality and then there are wild or "untrue" vines which simply will not produce good grapes.*

*A vine, the trunk of the grape vine, is rooted deeply in the soil. Most grape varieties send their roots quite deeply into the soil, so that once they are well established, the vines really don't have to be watered much, but often they are watered to increase yields. Some will not water them to stress the vines and they intensify the flavor of the grape. The vines pull that moisture from below the roots of the grasses and other plants in the area. This is one of the things that makes them ideal for this climate with its wet and dry seasons. The vines bring up that water and nutrients and feed the branches of the vine which then can be incredibly fruitful despite the dry, almost desert-like, summer climate. Without those roots and the trunk vine, the branches are lifeless. But connected, organically one with this source of sustenance, these branches grow quite long and become fruitful. In fact, the successful vineyard will aggressively prune these branches in the course of a growing season, a process called "hedging the vines," in order to crop back the extra foliage because this will affect the flavor of the fruit and the wine.*

*Jesus is suggesting that our dependence on him is absolute and complete. The vineyard owner prunes off the unfruitful branches. This too is very important for one who tends grapes, a vintner. The grape will be much more productive if it is pruned, and pruned quite hard. The sun needs to get into the vines. Often the grapes are planted on a particular axis to maximize sunshine. Too many leaves prevent air from flowing around the fruit creating a climate ripe for molds and other pests. This has to be done at a very specific time: too soon and the grapes are sunburned, too late and they will develop mold and mildew which is a huge pest for grapes. When Jesus says*

*that you are already clean, he is using a word here which is connected to this pruning act. A vine has been “cleaned up” after it has been pruned by the vintner. The pruning, the cleaning, is an action of God’s word to his people, spoken through Jesus. He does this, not you and me. He lops off the unnecessary branches. An unpruned vineyard will ultimately stop producing grapes. This takes some years, but it happens faster than you think. The vines get so distant from the root source that it cannot push the nutrients that far and they simply stop producing. The vine, interestingly, will continue to pump nutrients into the branches until it dies. Its sole purpose is to produce fruit.*

*Of course, a branch unconnected to the vine is dead, it bears no fruit, it is good only to be burned. The vineyard owner disposes of them. For the sake of the vineyard, he really has to get them out of there. They are a problem if they remain, harboring pests and cluttering the vineyard. Typically today they are chopped into mulch. Today, vineyards seed specific grasses which harbor beneficial insects. This is done to introduce an organic pest control. This seems brutal, because Jesus is of course talking about people here, but it is also true. I don’t think it is too much of a stretch to remember that there have been some individuals whose departure has made a congregation better. Of course, there are also aspects to my own life which he has also pruned rather harshly. It hurts to be pruned, and while it is happening, it is no fun. But the vine which has been pruned by a knowledgeable vineyard owner will be much healthier and more productive in the long run.*

*So we hang on Jesus, we derive the very sustenance of our life from him. Our fruitfulness is completely due to his supply of energy and the very water of life which sustains us. But still at the end of the passage is a terrifying thing, an “if.” If you abide in me...for anyone who takes Jesus seriously here, this is potentially a very fearful thing. After all, what does it mean to abide in Jesus? How does one do this? More importantly, have I done this? How would I know? I must admit that I have not spent every waking moment thinking about Jesus. I have not committed his word to memory. I could have done more. Have I failed to abide in him?*

*What does it mean to abide in Jesus? It does not mean always getting it right. It doesn’t even mean wanting to get it right all the time. I will even fail that much lower standard. Abiding in Christ is simply this: That one’s whole life is lived under the cross and in the light of the empty tomb. The Christian’s life abides in Jesus because when he considers his sin, he considers that Jesus has died for it. When he considers his virtue, he notices that Christ is in action there. There are two ways to fail here. Either one takes one’s sin to another place for forgiveness and healing, or one owns the works of God as if they were solely mine. Thus, when I get this totally wrong, my only hope is Christ. When I get it right, my only boast is in Him. I abide there.*

*Continuing with the grape imagery here, the branch that has been grafted into the vine soon grows together and they become one thing. It abides in the vine, it draws its sustenance from that vine. The point of the graft heals over, the root does not fruit, the branch fruits, but the branch draws its sustenance from the root. Perhaps the question is where is your root? Is this really a*

*first commandment issue? Our God is the one who gives us the solution to our deepest and most serious problems. Is the abiding issue really about who is my God? Is this easier and harder at the same time than we usually give it credit?*

*The Father is vinedresser, I am not. I am dressed, I am grafted and pruned. He connects me to Jesus, I don't connect myself to Jesus. To focus at this point on my faith as being the connection has a distinct danger, it sounds like something that I do. This is not about encouraging folks to more faith, but it is about celebrating what even tiny mustard seed like faith does. It connects us to the very power of the universe. That faith is the conduit through which God works, it is not the quantity of the faith that makes the difference, indeed, it is God who makes the difference.*

*A grape branch that is grafted into the true vine rootstock may get diseased, moldy, or otherwise sick. The branch will not be able to solve this problem, the vine dresser will have to come in with his clippers and cut that out.*

*The goal of the text is fruitfulness – the connectedness, the means to the fruitfulness. We abide in Christ so that we may be fruitful. We proclaim the connection and count on Christ to supply the energy, and the Father to dress the vine. Our job is to do what Christ does through us. We tend to look at our life and tend to see ourselves as being “unfruitful.” But then our complaint is with God. We are grafted into Christ in our baptism, we are sustained in the sacrament and the preaching of the Gospel.*

*We preach the graft not the fruitfulness today. The graft is the connection we have with Christ. The fruit production is the work of God. Yet, he works that work through our preaching as well. The word is performative, it achieves that for which we send it. The problem is that we often preach the productivity but fail to base it in the graft, as if the branches can produce without being connected to the root. It is the Father who prunes, who leads us to the people, who equips us, who chops off the things that get in the way. He is the one who makes it possible for these silly vines to produce the fruit.*

*Even this is impossible for me alone, but for the gift of his Holy Spirit. He connects me to Christ in the waters of my baptism, in the flesh and blood of the altar, in the fellowship of my fellow believer, the hearing of the Word, in the forgiving voice of pastor and people as they live out, however faultily, this vine-like existence. Through those things the very nutrients of God flow into my life and through me into the lives of those around me. This enables the good fruit to be born, the gifts of life to those who are hungry for food and righteousness, the embrace of God for the lonely and the guilty, the poor and the poor in heart.*

*In the past we have talked about running with this sacramentally, specifically using the Lord's Supper. Jesus says he is the vine and we are the branches, we have him. The preacher who wants to do this can very solidly point to the sacrament as the very sap of our faith. This is the very essence of who we are. Jesus has come inside us. He abides in us. He is not just speaking metaphorically there, he is not kidding. He has really taken up residence inside us.*

*Abide also presents another possible point of preaching. The word “abide” means to dwell with, live in. In Hebrew the word had the sense of a judge sitting on his seat, but it could also be a person waiting in ambush. It had the sense of endure and occupy. This was a very rich word in the ancient world and is worthy of deeper study in a Theological Dictionary. The Greek is “meno”.*

## Law

1. God has very high standards, standards I cannot hope to reach. His kingdom is a kingdom of perfect love and too often my life is not reflective of that love. I find myself greedy and self-serving. I do not jump into opportunities to love, but find it much easier to withdraw into my comfortable world, which really isn't all that comfortable now that I think about it.
2. This discomfort, if I really think about it leaves me with a gnawing sort of fear. I am not really good enough. My Christianity is something of a veneer and God is not going to be fooled by this. Did my baptismal graft really “take?” Ed tells us that up to 20% of the grafts done in a vineyard might fail. There is nothing I can really do about this. Like the eunuch or the gentile in the Old Testament, I really don't belong in God's courts.
3. This fear, a faith crisis, paralyzes me. Instead of spurring me on to greater works, fear rots out my heart. I will wake with the best of intentions, but fear saps my strength and renders me spiritually inept and relationally hollow. Like a branch unconnected, I produce no fruit. Forgetting the reality of what God has done for me in baptism, sacrament and Word, I am cut off from the source of life and strength.
4. This fear also blinds me. I am hopeless and I cannot see beyond the problems. I cannot solve the problem, I cannot give myself some sort of spiritual life. I am one of the branches the Lord has cut off, I am an emotionally and spiritually maimed human being who before too many decades will be physically cut off from life as well. I can almost feel the flames licking at my side.

## Gospel

1. Yes God has very high standards and that is why he sent Jesus into the flesh, to meet those standards in the cross. The empty tomb, the resurrection we celebrate today is the vindication of that effort. Jesus death for the sins of the whole world was payment enough, death's hold on him and us has been broken. That incarnate presence of God did not end when Jesus ascended, but now, by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, by baptism and supper, by fellowship and Word, Jesus has taken up residence in our lives with his love. We are grafted into the true vine.

2. That love which flows from him, that life, drives out our fear. Our first fear to be driven out is our fear of God. He is no longer the enemy, the cruel judge who would condemn us. Now he is the vindicator and the giver of the life which sin has wrenched from me. This is not about my doing, but his doing.
3. Driving out my fear, Jesus empowers me with His love. We have all known the person who goes the extra mile for someone else, the woman who lovingly looks after her husband with alzheimers long past the time when the world would have said “leave him.” We have seen the parent care for the disabled child. We have seen the old guy who is there just about every Saturday to mow the lawn at church. We have seen those people who give and give and this same Jesus has taken up residence in our hearts and lives. He loves today through us.
4. But that service is really a product of hope. The parent of the disabled child has seen that we are all disabled and we have all been redeemed by Christ. My child’s disability shows up this way, my disability shows up another way, and Christ has loved us both and made astounding promises to us both. We are one with life itself, Christ has merged us into himself, we are branches on the vine. Grafting involves a wound, the root is sliced open and the branch is grafted in. Jesus has been pierced, sliced open, that we may be grafted into him, baptized into his crucified death, so that today his life flows through us.

#### Sermon ideas

1. Living with the Love of God (Epistle Sermon Series – That the Holy Spirit of God would shape the life of the hearer to embody the love of the Incarnate Christ.)

This sermon will note that we are both beloved and lovers, and that those two things are inextricably connected. To deny one is to deny the other. But John asserts this in a very doctrinal sense which may take some explanation for our people. Best, however, is not to explain it but to illustrate it.

John was dealing with a problem in the first century of some folks who made their faith far more rational and reasonable. God, being spiritual, eternal, and holy, would not have truly entered the flesh, Jesus must have been a spirit. Some of them were docetists, folks who thought Jesus only “seemed” to be human. The Greek word “dokeo” (seem) gives its name to this movement. Others would adopt a de facto sort of Gnosticism in which Jesus had only really come to save our souls.

But John saw the lie in all this. As Gregory of Nazianzus would say about 300 years later as this issue continued to bubble throughout the Christian community: If Jesus did not take it up, he did not save it. If Jesus did not take up our humanity, in all its humanness he did not save it. But what John saw with crystal clarity is that when Jesus took up our humanity he enabled us to love our fellow human being in a different way. If Jesus only



died to save our spirit/soul, then the suffering of my neighbor is just something to be escaped. Indeed, I might even justify allowing him to die because that would free his immortal soul from his body. Some have made this argument in the past. It is evil.

Jesus did come in the flesh and that means that my neighbor's humanity, in his/her suffering and in his/her rejoicing, has all been redeemed by Christ and is somehow ineffably connected to him. When I love him/her I am loving Jesus. The presence of Christ is not found in some right theology or some right spiritual attitude but it is seen in the love which Christians show to others. John simply won't let us spiritualize Jesus to the point where that is lost. While I would never argue that the truth does not matter, Paul himself tells me that without love all knowledge and rectitude is empty and vain (I Cor. 13.)

This sermon will dance dangerously close to edge of a cliff, but if it runs away from that cliff, it will not achieve safety because it will not proclaim the Gospel. The cliff is the idea that somehow our good works, our loving our neighbor, are absolutely necessary for our salvation. Crudely understood, this is simply works righteousness. But to run away from that precipice is to say that our works and the way we treat our neighbor are matters of indifference, perhaps sins which Jesus has forgiven, but otherwise disconnected from our salvation. It is only when we approach the cliff, tremulously looking over its edge, that we begin to see and live the reality that our works are in fact the living out of Jesus' love. Our love is not a matter of indifference. As John says here it is the very presence of God. Without God dwelling in us, we are lost, utterly and completely. But we cannot own that love as if it is ours without God. That too is another problem. So we must walk this edge, proclaiming the importance of love without turning it into something for which God rewards us.

I really think that this sort of a sermon calls for a story. I mentioned the story of St. Martin of Tours earlier. Better would be a story of someone whom your congregation knew. Someone who lived out this love and in retrospect you can see the face of Jesus in that life lived. This sermon will want to point the hearer to the embodiment of theology in love. It is best not to make this into a form of hero worship. This should be a normal everyday sort of person, but someone in whom God abided and in some way we could see that. I can think of several from my parish ministry. I hope you can too.

The sermon will want to point to this person, help the hearer discern this face of Christ in the love of the other. Acknowledge that Christ took up a sinful humanity to himself. He is not ashamed to dwell with us. He is not tainted by our sin, but his holiness renders us pure. This love we see is not someone earning God's favor, it is the beautiful evidence of that favor proclaimed in baptism. The preacher will be careful here. This is not looking at the person for the person's sake, it is looking at the person in order to see Jesus because Jesus has kept his promise and abides with his people, and the eyes of faith can see Him.

The preacher might effectively conclude this sermon by declaring that Jesus is seen the faces and hands and actions of this congregation. You might be excited to see what he has in store, a beautiful story to tell, as that love unfolds in this place. You might be eagerly anticipating what he will do.

The goal of the sermon is that in seeing Christ the hearer will turn to their neighbor and love with this Christ-love as well. This is a beautiful thing to see in another person and a beautiful thing to see in yourself. It is never perfect. Jesus does not call saints, he calls sinners and makes them saints. This takes time and it does not happen overnight, but baptism has begun a good work in us that Jesus is bringing to completion (Philippians 1:6). Seen through this lens, the mother who makes breakfast for her children, the father who coaches the little league team, the neighbor who stops to talk to the old woman who lives down the street, or the student in the school who simply is gentle and kind with the awkward misfit in class is another embodiment of Christ. This is where Jesus shows up, not in the “spiritual” thing which is up in the clouds or immaterial. Jesus shows up in the love which inhabits our lives. That love is expressed to our closest family and friends, and to our enemies. It is expressed to strangers and the people we have known our whole lives.

Theology is calling it what it is. Theology helps us see it. The understanding empowers and makes it better, but it is Jesus who creates it and calls it into being. He has done that already in your baptism. He continues to do that in this word and in this sacrament. So take a good look, find the love, and see Jesus.

This would be a great confirmation sermon. The confirmand is often told by the world that his/her life has no real meaning. We are simply another human, a member of the species that is burdening this world. Our lives have no positive meaning, may in fact have a great deal of negative meaning as the world is burdened by too many human beings. This text tells that young person that his/her life is connected to Christ, he lives in us, he is found/located in the love. We can see Jesus in you.

2. Christ has opened every door! (Acts and Is 56 – That the hearer rejoices in the loving acceptance of Christ for himself or herself and then turns to neighbor and friend and express that same acceptance to those cut off from Christ today.)
  - a. The eunuch was excluded from Jewish worship and full inclusion in the religion. He could do nothing about the color of his skin, nor about his physical condition which also excluded him. Even if he could find some Jewish great grandmother, he was still a eunuch, “cut off” from the people of God who were counting on a promised child, a lineage of which he could never be an ancestor, of which he could never be a part.

- b. God has included the outcast in Christ. By the incarnation of Jesus he has united himself with the whole of humanity. There is no brokenness in this world for which he has not died and risen again. There is no sinner, no criminal, no addict, no leper, no one who suffers from swine flu, AIDS, or Ebola, for whom he has not died and whose life has not been restored in Jesus.
- c. **Like Philip, God leads us to people who need to hear that story. He loves the folks outside the church so much that he put us in this town so that through us they might also hear and ask, “what is to keep us from baptism.”**

Called upon to love what God commands us to love and to desire what he promises, today we see Philip expressing the love which Jesus has commanded, crossing cultural, ethnic, economic, political, every boundary. He has sent us into the whole world, to love everyone, even the enemy. That can be hard. The stranger might be cut off from the community for a very good reason. The addict, the criminal, the homosexual, the person with swine flu, the illegal immigrant; this list could go on, they are all outside our regular sphere of contact for a reason which makes sense to someone. But Jesus has loved them all. He has come into the flesh to redeem them all; he has risen from the dead and sent us into this world to love them all with his love. And therein lies the good news.

This sermon will challenge the congregation to think outside itself. We are very good at noticing that Jesus died for us and for people just like us. The Law development in this sermon may well want to point out that like the Jews of Jesus day we often welcome only the folks we find acceptable. But Jesus’ love opens every door, even doors to people whom we might not ever see. Depending on your community you might point to the economic doors, the racial doors, and much more.

On the other hand, the congregation which is already engaged in an ethnic ministry or the care of the poor or another part of the community should be commended and should realize that this really is God working through them. Point them to the good that God is doing. This is often much more effective than pointing out what we are not doing.

- 3. Grafted into the vine: (That the hearer would bear the fruit for which God has united us to himself.)
  - a. Of ourselves, we are spiritually helpless and weak creatures. Love is the creative power of the universe, and we are lousy at it. We cannot love with a real and thorough love. We are dry and lifeless in this regard, for all our physical health and all our desire; it doesn’t make much difference if we cannot simply do it.
  - b. Christ has come into this world to unite himself with sinful humanity, in every way. John enjoins us that a true spirit is the one which confesses Christ in the flesh. He is in the flesh because the unity which he has achieved is a total unity

with humanity. He has run the fully human race. See the grafting image in point four of the gospel development above. Jesus comes to us in the sacraments of baptism and the altar – this is not just a metaphor but real! God has not come into our lives to be inert, merely “there” but he has come into our lives to do things, to live through us.

- c. That presence of Christ in the world, that living and active Jesus in the flesh means that he has united himself with my life and given my deeds, my words, my presence his awesome potential for good. I will always stumble and the fact that I am often impure in my own desires and motives does not change the fact that he has united himself to me and rendered my life holy. By connecting me to himself in Baptism, I no longer may claim that I don’t have what it takes to be fruitful. He has supplied my every need in this regard.

We often speak of ourselves as being saved, but I wonder if we don’t think of that like all the stuff I have “saved” in my basement and garage. I wonder if this is not because we make too much of our sins, imagining that their magnitude has somehow rendered God powerless to work through us. The Biblical story smashes that idea. God has gone to great lengths, descending from his throne all the way to hellish death and grave and in that united us to himself in Christ. He has risen gloriously from the grave so that he might shepherd his people with care and compassion.

All this is to a purpose, united to him we are now the indwelling, incarnate events in which his love is expressed to this world. The little things that I do and the great ones too, now are all infused with a holy and awesome potential. The love of God resides in my heart. I mean that not only in the sense that I love God, but also that he loves through me. It is God’s love that infuses my life. (In grammatical terms, that is an objective and subjective genitive “Love of God” can be both his love for me and my love for God.)

Our great hindrance in all this is actually our own self perception. We think that if God is involved it has to be perfect, which is normally true, but that is why Jesus came to the earth and walked among sinful men and sent those same sinful people into the world. My taint is not greater than God’s holiness. Though my reasons for helping the man may indeed be an admixture of virtue and self interest, God’s presence in that act means that it can be a genuinely good and holy act, the fruit for which Jesus died. God is not rendered powerless in the face of our sin, he has conquered sin and death, and though my life does not today measure up to heaven’s standards, that does not mean he is not at work in it. Indeed, my brokenness is often integral to the success of this mission. He has not sent angels to proclaim the kingdom to the world for a reason. If the mechanism is by faith, then the messenger cannot be perfect, it must be a broken person just like you and me.

For the preacher in a congregation that is feeling discouraged and “fruitless” he will want to focus on the fact that God the Father is the vinedresser, not the congregant, nor the

congregation. Many in our pews are not only wondering if their children will be in church but they are also worried that their church will have no children. They are feeling fruitless. We will need to remember who's who in the vineyard – we tend to take too much to ourselves. If we succeed we like the credit and if our congregation fails, we tend to think that it is our fault. The truth is we are vines, if we have not born fruit, our complaint really is with the vinedresser. Fields which have gone fallow can indeed be pruned and revived. The vines don't do this, the vinedresser does, and that is God. We come today in hopeful expectation. Our prayers are to God, our confidence is in the connection to him that he has established through His son and our baptism/word/sacramental relationship. Luther said, "Remember your grafting daily." Of course, a bottle of wine can help too.