

**Faith Mennonite Church**  
**May 10, 2009 – Easter 5**  
**Joetta Schlabach**

**Abiding in the Word and in the Vine**

*Acts 8:26-40; John 15:1-8*

The little drama you just observed<sup>1</sup> provides a stark contrast to our scripture lessons this morning. In a humorous way it exposes the way that prayer easily gets trivialized in our fast-paced, consumerist culture. Prayer becomes a shopping list of our wants and wishes and Jesus is little more than a magical, vending machine.

But as people of the resurrection, our prayer life is much more than a bidding game. When God raised Jesus from the dead, this confirmed the message of the Kingdom that Jesus had proclaimed in his teaching, his healing actions and in his death. As we live the resurrection in our lives, prayer is a relationship that shapes and sustains us. It is a conversation that empowers and propels us into the world.

And that's one thing that the skit got right: the "worldly" setting—the coffee shop atmosphere. Jesus always seemed to gravitate toward crowds (or crowds gravitated to him). He drew people into conversation in places with food and drink, places that were intimate but which were open so others could listen in. So it's not surprising that, in the Gospel of John, we find Jesus speaking of his relationship with his disciples and followers using the metaphor of a grapevine, where grapes grow in clusters. One senses community in this metaphor.

There was a time in early church history, beginning around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, when some Christians thought the only way they could pray and live holy lives was to run away from the cities, from the degenerate civilization of the Empire. People who we now refer to as the "desert fathers and mothers" went to lonely places in the deserts of Egypt where they built individual hermitages and prayed and fought demons in ascetic isolation. While there is a certain wisdom that lives on today in the writings from these desert Christians, and while Jesus, too, withdrew to lonely places from time to time, the Gospel and other New Testament writings more often portray the venue of Christian living and prayer in the engaged hub of coffee-shop, town-square, and home settings.

Interestingly, the story of Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts specifically notes that they were traveling, individually, down a wilderness road. But the focus of the story almost immediately turns to the way the Spirit brings them into conversation with one another. Although in the wilderness, they find spiritual communion, and the story ends with the eunuch being baptized, bringing him into the community of the whole body of Christ.

What else can this story tell us about prayer? First of all, prayer is about listening. Unlike the man in our skit who wouldn't let Jesus get a word in edgewise, Philip stopped talking and listened long enough to hear an angel tell him to hit the road toward Gaza. And as he approached the chariot with the eunuch, he heard the Spirit speaking again: go join the man in the chariot. If Philip had met Jesus in the coffee shop, my guess is he wouldn't have pulled out his wish list quite so quickly. To have a meaningful, inspired prayer life, we need to learn to be still and simply listen. And it's not that we just need to put our wish lists aside. We also need to quiet the voices of our mind, the ego, which often plays negative loop tapes, even suggesting we're not worthy to have a conversation with God. Jesus wants each and every one of us to be connected branches on the vine.

The second thing this story tells us about prayer is that it involves reading, studying, and meditating on scripture. Karen Armstrong, who studies and has written extensively on the three Abrahamic religious traditions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, notes that in the Jewish tradition, scripture study is considered prayer. Sr. Joanne Klinnert, who gave a presentation on Sabbath at our women's retreat yesterday, reiterated this, noting that reflection on scripture is one of the traditional aspects of Jewish Sabbath observance.

Scripture tells the story of our faith. In broad strokes it is a five-part story: of creation, the fall, God's covenant work through Israel, God's incarnation and redeeming work in Jesus, and finally the life of the church.<sup>ii</sup> We can't begin to live in act five of this dramatic story if we're not familiar with the previous acts, with the whole. We can't expect to hear and discern the voice of God today if we're not familiar with the voice of God heard through past generations.

While individual prayer and devotion are good and necessary, they are never sufficient. Like the Ethiopian man, we need to gain insight from others, to learn from those who have studied. We should never hesitate to admit, as the Ethiopian man did to Philip, that we need a guide in order to understand. It is good to seek out the wisdom and understanding of Christians who have been on the path longer than we when we have questions that perplex us. Our Christian education classes, the Sunday morning Bible study group that meets in the church library at 8:30, and our Tuesday morning lectionary discussions are excellent times for sharing and testing insights of what the Word speaks to us today.

One final thing the Acts 8 account tells us about prayer is that it leads to action and new directions. The Ethiopian man, after his encounter with Philip, asked to be baptized. He was ready to commit himself to this new life in the Spirit, of following Jesus. We do not know, but I imagine that this man helped to carry the story of Jesus to Egypt. And Philip was once again directed by the Spirit in another direction to carry the story of Jesus to another community.

The story ends with the two men parting ways. One man continues toward Egypt, the other goes to Caesarea. But neither goes on alone. They remain connected to one another because each is connected to Jesus, the vine.

Working in the garden this past Monday morning was a good place to ruminate on this image of abiding in the vine. I rented a roto-tiller from the local hardware store for a couple hours. This was the first time that I had used one of these machines and I was in for a bit of a surprise about how much muscle power they require. My upper arms and shoulders are still a bit stiff, but the earth turned and was quickly prepared for the seeds, which I anticipate will "bear much fruit."

After I tilled, I applied compost—some from John and Kristen's chickens, some from our own vegetable composter. I was reminded again how the refuse, the garbage of our lives, contributes to a new growth, more fruit, when we let go of it, letting God prune it away and burn it off.

All of this is possible because Jesus already lives within us. Prayer is our response to Jesus' invitation to "Abide in me as I abide in you." Sometimes we speak of inviting Jesus into our hearts. But that's backwards. Jesus invites us into his heart, into our place on the vine. We are not grapes on this vine, but branches that grow fruit as we draw sustenance from the source of life. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, identified the fruit we produce as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (5:22-23). What more could we want to be surrounded by and to share with others?

On Friday morning, I accompanied Cindy Bjork at the funeral of the father-in-law of her son Michael. As we entered St. Mary on the Lake Church in Plymouth we were met by a large wall mural, carved in wood. It immediately caught my attention because the background was a grapevine, with clusters of grapes. Superimposed over the vine was a quote from Peter Maurin, a colleague of Dorothy Day in the Catholic Worker Movement. "The task of the church," Maurin said, "is to create a society in which it would be easier to be good." We are privileged to live this wonderful resurrection adventure of abiding in the Word and in the Vine through prayer, and producing fruit of goodness.

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<sup>i</sup> "Coffee with Jesus" can be viewed at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_guO3-NLDEs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_guO3-NLDEs)

<sup>ii</sup> There are various schemas for describing the biblical story. This five-part model comes from British Anglican bishop and New Testament scholar N.T. Wright, described in his book *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*. HarperSan Francisco 2005.