

WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE



Scripture:

Acts 8:26-40

²⁶Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a wilderness road.) ²⁷So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” ³⁰So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” ³¹He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. ³²Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. ³³In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.”

³⁴The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” ³⁵Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” ³⁸He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. ³⁹When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. ⁴⁰But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

John 15:4-8

⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

This is the word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



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The word “abide” literally means to accept, withstand, tolerate, or act in accordance with. But the old English definition of abide is: “to live or dwell in.” Such as, “I abide in the town of Santa Rosa.”

Christ was using vivid imagery in this passage about the vine and the branches to teach his disciples how they must abide in him, live in him and him in them. And when we do that we do more than just say we are a Christian, we act Christ-like in all ways at all times. Abiding in Christ is a 24/7 experience!

I love this “I am the vine and you are the branches” imagery. It emphasizes connection with God and with one another.

GOD’S FAMILY TREE

**We are all in God’s family tree.
But some of us are treated like
the black sheep of the family.
When the queer ones are outcast or
given less respect by others in the
family of God and made to feel as if
they are not worthy of equal
benefits and justice, then Jesus is
not abiding in that part of the vine.**

The branch has dried up and lost its vitality. And that part of the vine is not producing good fruit. Sometimes God allows that branch to be pruned and cut off to help the center of the vine grow even stronger and produce even more loving faithful fruit.

I think that is happening to the Presbyterian Church USA. Our church government, with the help of Bible scholars and faithful church leaders, has taken many years to analyze the scriptures and discern how the greater message of love in the Bible guides our decisions about how to incorporate people of different sexual orientations into ordained ministry in the church. As of 2011, the new words for our ordination of elders, deacons and ministers now focuses on submitting “*joyfully to the Lordship of Jesus Christ in all aspects of life,*” rather than focusing on fidelity and chastity.

LOVE

The PCUSA committee that studied this topic came to the conclusion that love is the abiding rule of God’s message in the Bible, and all that we do and say to follow Christ’s role modeling must be done in the context of doing justice, loving kindness, walking humbly, and loving our neighbors. And that means showing our love by being in solidarity with them to combat injustice.

DAY OF SILENCE

For example Presbyterians showed solidarity this year through participating in the Day of Silence events across the nation on April 17th. Founded in 1996, at the University of Virginia and at the Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, the Day of Silence has become the largest student-led action towards creating safer schools for all, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.

The event brings attention to anti-Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, and Questioning name-calling, bullying and harassment in schools. Those participating take a vow of silence in an effort to encourage schools and classmates to address the problem of anti-LGBTQ behavior by illustrating the silencing effect of bullying and harassment.

Though the conversations about LGBTQ people have changed a lot in the last twenty years, current statistics tell us why the Day of Silence is still an important and necessary event. Four out of five LGBTQ students nationally report having been harassed in the past year. Eighty per cent of transgender students report that they don't feel safe at school. LGBTQ youth are over four times more likely to have attempted suicide than their straight peers, or to have skipped a day of school in the past month due to feeling unsafe. Even more troubling, because of the overwhelming lack of support many LGBTQ students feel, they often don't report it when they are harassed. Life can be hard, and can be especially hard for those who feel alone, or whose voice has been taken, whether through force or fear.

But the silence of solidarity is life-saving. In appreciation for the Day of Silence event, one student said, "It is the kind of silence that allows people of a

different sexual orientation to know that though things are difficult, we are not alone and someone cares."

THE ETHIOPIAN EUNUCH

Philip listened to the Ethiopian eunuch and heard his efforts to faithfully understand the scriptures. Rather than just pass him by, Philip reached out and welcomed this man into the Christian community through discipleship and baptism.

Jesus was the first, Philip the second and Paul the third true examples of what being welcoming and inclusive looks like.

BE WELCOMING

Likewise we are to abide in the way of Christ by being welcoming and inclusive of all who come to our doors here at church or wherever we may have a chance to invite someone to join us here for worship and our many programs and activities.

This concern to be welcoming and inclusive is dear to my heart because I had a good friend in my class at Princeton Theological seminary who attempted suicide because another close friend rejected him. After my friend received supportive counseling he felt brave enough to tell his father he was gay. But his father replied, "I am, too, but don't tell your mom!" Being born and raised in New Mexico, sadly he felt he had to keep silent and pretend to be straight to stay alive.

In Galatians 3:28 Paul taught the church of Galatia, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." That is the way we are to look

at the branches on God's vine of love. And we are to do all we can to enable those branches to yield more fruit for the glory of God by perceiving all of humanity as One in Christ Jesus.



Benediction:

Be welcoming and inclusive. By so doing you will help yourself and our church produce good fruit and bless God's ever expanding vine of love.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and forever more. Amen

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May 3, 2015**