

## *Is There Room on the Vine?*

Acts 8: 26-40

John 15: 1-8

We don't like to think of the church as a club. Yes, we have members, and that is kind of like a club. But we aren't a club, right?

A club suggests that people have the same interests, often a self-interest or personal pre-occupation that draws them to the organization. It might be the gardening club, the bridge club, the yacht club, the golf club, or the model train club. Well, churches can be seen the same way, too. Our self-interest or personal pre-occupation has to do with personal faith conviction, and that personal faith conviction draws us to certain churches and not to other churches. But still, we aren't a club, right?

Clubs often have dues which members pay. We don't have dues *per se*, but we do have bills to pay and we do pass the collection plate every time we gather. Surely that doesn't make us a club.

Clubs tend to be focused on themselves, but you can find plenty of exceptions. A motorcycle club may hold a run to benefit a sick child or some other local cause. Essentially a dining club, like the Moose Lodge, sponsors scholarships and contributes to its members' retirement facilities. A club at the Del Webb gated community in Summerfield has provided thousands of dollars to support the food pantry that my son Ray started in Ocklawaha ten years ago. It probably isn't entirely fair to say that clubs are focused only on themselves and their self interests.

Despite all of this blurring of distinctions between clubs and churches, we know that churches are different. While people belong as members to the church, we have a different understanding about what membership and belonging here means. In both places, we're likely to have a desire to belong, but in a church, it's got a different meaning.

We get a sense of this unique connection, this particular belonging that we have in the church when we read the passage from John 15. Here Jesus is talking about the vine and the branches. Jesus describes the nature of the relationship with all of his disciples, here before he is arrested, but also pointing to the time ahead when he will no longer be a living presence with them.

The image of the vine and the branches is laden with symbolism. Obviously, the vine and its fruit are indicative of grapes and remind us of the wine of the Lord's Supper. The vine is a metaphor used in the Old Testament, where Israel may be referred to as the vine planted and tended by God, nurtured and cared for in some times, trampled or uprooted in others. It speaks of the special relationship of God with God's people, the vine and its branches. Jesus uses it in the same way, with God identified as the gardener, as the one who planted and nurtured the vine – Jesus – and who continues his care for the branches – the disciples – attached to the vine.

There is an obvious dependency; the branches have **no life** apart from the vine. In this, the vine takes on the aspect of the **tree of life**. It's as if God the Gardener has planted a new Eden, or has sustained the original garden through the vine – Jesus.

The vine with the branches are planted and kept by God the Gardener for a purpose. They're expected to bear fruit. Branches that fail to bear fruit are pruned from the vine. The purpose of the pruning is to make the vine "even more fruitful."

What fruit should the vine and the branches bear? Jesus answered this question when he was challenged by the teachers of the Law about the most important commandment. He answered that the Torah-Law was summed up in the commandments to love god and to love your neighbor as yourself. Love is the fruit that the vine and its branches are expected to produce. Anything that does not arise out of love does not have a place on the vine and leads to it being pruned.

We can see this in churches; the ones bearing fruit are able to endure many kinds of trials thanks to the loving providence of God the Gardener. The churches that fail to bear fruit, that have become distracted, neglectful, and in-grown, more focused on loving and caring for themselves than others are the ones that have closed their doors and no longer have a place on the vine. It is a message that was appropriate for the churches in John's time. The imagery of the vine and its pruning of those not bearing fruit would resonate among churches who, after 4-5 generations of existence may have fallen into wrongful, ineffective, or uninspired ministry. While it may point to the adoption of one of the heresies that circulated at the time of the writing of the gospel, the main point is that these churches no longer reflected the love of the Lord.

The fruit to be borne by the branches of the vine finds a stunning portrayal in the other scripture reading from the book of Acts. Acts chapter 8 is like "Philip's chapter." It's the only place where Philip figures prominently.

This account of Philip's ministry comes at a difficult time. In the preceding chapter, there was the stoning of Stephen and a general persecution of the followers of Jesus ensued. The disciples fled Jerusalem, the center of their ministry operations. In effect, they were driven out of their church. What now?

Philip takes this time away from Jerusalem and turns it from a negative into a positive. He seizes the opportunity to go first to Samaria and share the good news of Jesus the Messiah. Initiating a ministry to Samaritans was a bold extension of their mission. Samaritans were considered lost, sinners outside the Jewish covenant, indeed despised by Jews. Much of the ministry in Jerusalem had been oriented to Jews, seeking to bring God's good news to God's people. But Samaritans weren't God's people, for the Jews at least. So, Philip's decision to go to Samaria and share the good news crossed a major boundary. Philip seemed to understand in this new situation that to bear fruit, to share and bless with the love of Jesus, meant that old divisions and traditional exclusions that were common in Judaism actually had no place in the gospel of Jesus.

But it gets better. From the area north of Israel in Samaria, Philip is sent to the south, to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Along the way, Philip encounters an Ethiopian eunuch on a chariot. The way the story is told, it sounds like Philip is running alongside the chariot and having a conversation with the Ethiopian eunuch. We're also told that the eunuch is the chief treasury official in the palace of Queen Candace.

The text says that the Ethiopian eunuch had been in Jerusalem to worship. He is likely part of the ancient group of Jews in Ethiopia, perhaps dating back from the time of Solomon. He came as a worshiper at the Jerusalem temple, but is **not** identified as a Jew. In other places in the book of Acts, such people who are not Jews but are worshipers of the God of the Jews are named God-fearers. There is a special place for them in the outer periphery of the Temple area. They're prohibited from the main temple.

The eunuch is reading a text from the prophet Isaiah. Philip hears him reading and asks him if he understands what the prophet is talking about. The eunuch admits that he doesn't, and needs someone to act as a teacher and a guide. For his interest in being helpful, Philip gets invited into the chariot where he tells the eunuch about how the passage relates to Jesus the Messiah.

At some point the chariot comes to water, and the Ethiopian eunuch asks: *Why shouldn't I be baptized?* From our viewpoint in history, we would say, 'Indeed, why not baptize this fellow?'

There are two excellent reasons according to first (and second) century Judaism why this Ethiopian eunuch should **not** be baptized. **One** is that he's **Ethiopian**; **two** is that he's a **eunuch**. Ethiopians were considered outside the covenant of God's people; period, end of discussion. Like Greeks, Romans and Samaritans, Ethiopians were not chosen by God.

And eunuchs ... oh, good heavens. If there is one thing that is absolutely abhorrent to Jews, it is eunuchs. To have lost the ability to reproduce, to have no capacity for sexual relations, to act as God intended a man should act, that was considered abominable. People today think homosexuality is some horrid sin. Being a eunuch was far, far worse in the era of Jesus and the early church. In fact, I can't think of *anything* worse than being a eunuch.

So, this Ethiopian eunuch, despite a leading officer in the Ethiopian kingdom, with the respect and responsibility that comes with it, would not find Jerusalem or Judaism a very accepting place. A request for baptism would probably be met with derision, if not a beating.

When Philip hears this request, his attitude is entirely different. His response is to baptize him on the spot. Philip's response is the same that Jesus would have had. Philip reflects that unconditional love, and shows the early Jesus movement faithfully bearing fruit.

Who is in and who is out defines the parameters of belonging. An Ethiopian eunuch would definitely be out, except the love of Jesus embraces him and anyone else who would recognize him as Lord.

We may not have problems with Ethiopian eunuchs having their place on the vine with the rest of us. But there may be others with whom we do have a problem. There are a lot of Christian folks who have problems with homosexuals. I don't have problems with homosexuals or with Ethiopian eunuchs.

But I must admit I do have problems with some others. Southern Baptists in general come to mind. Now there are a lot of good folks who are Southern Baptists. More commonly, there is a wide gulf between what typical Southern Baptist pastor believes, and what I believe. Do you mean I have to accept sharing a place on the vine with Southern Baptists?

And how about Rabbi Jerry Keyes, the fellow who is both Jew and Christian? He is pastor, or is it rabbi, at the messianic Jewish congregation in the Shores. I suppose he has a place on the vine, too, and I have to accept that?

Let's face it; God has some odd varieties of fruit growing on the vine. But that's God's business. God is the gardener after all.

My role is simply to bear fruit, and that means showing the love of Christ, even to folks the value of whose fruit I would question. That judgment isn't mine to make. I need to be responsible for the fruit that I bear, and you the fruit that you bear, and us together as a church showing the fruit that reflects the love of Christ for all. If we can produce the fruit that is a fair reflection of the love of the Lord for us, then our place on the vine will be valued, and the good blessing of the Lord will go forth from our witness.