

“SUPREME” CHRISTIANITY: III – “COME SEE ABOUT ME”

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Elkton United Methodist Church

September 24, 2017

Christian Education Sunday

Acts 8:26-40

John 15:1-11

The other day I was scrolling through Facebook when I came upon a post by a member of our church who was having a big tree in her backyard taken down and removed. The before and after pictures of the backyard were astounding – before the tree filled a huge space in the yard – after, it looks virtually empty.

Seeing that brought to mind something I had read a while ago from a writer named Janet Hunt where something similar happened to her. She had a big, beautiful ash tree in her backyard that had to be taken down because it had become infested with something called an “emerald ash borer” – or probably more accurately, many emerald ash borers.

At any rate, they had done their worst, or as Hunt put it, “They got the best of it. Or likely more, that those insects managed to take the life out of it.”

Ironically, about that same time, Hunt (a pastor) discovered that the assigned passage on which she would be preaching that week was the Gospel lesson we have this week – Jesus’ words about the vine and the branches – and suddenly, she said it came alive for her. Watching her beloved tree being torn down, helped her realize the truth of the Savior’s words. She writes: “It almost goes without saying that once a branch is cut off from its life source, it is simply not going to live long, not to mention be at the end of its fruit-bearing potential.” (Janet Hunt, “The Vine, the Branches, and My Ash Tree,” *Dancing with the Word*, April 2015)

She is so right – branches cannot thrive or even survive without the vine. It’s all about being connected.

Which leads me right to the other lesson – to that eunuch sitting in his chariot on that day on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. As he sat there pondering the scripture from Isaiah, I think he was thinking about that connection – because as soon as the Spirit of God moved Philip to come to him and offer to help him understand, the eunuch accepted his help. He invited him to come and sit down in his chariot and help him understand the Word.

Philip did just that – and did it in apparently such a powerful way that the eunuch asked to be baptized – and was. Clearly, Philip was able to help that

eunuch understand Jesus, and to help him understand that Jesus was the vine to which he and everyone else was connected.

You know, friends, part of our connection with Christ comes through our connection with other believers. One pastor put it this way: “We do not come to faith alone. We learn from others and we pass on what we know to the next generation. Faith is a team sport. We are much better at it when we pull together, when we learn from one another, when we interact with each other, when we reach out to others and experience their reaching out to us. You can’t be a Christian alone (she concludes). It is simply impossible, for relationships (connectedness) are the basis of Christianity, our relationship to God and God’s relationship to us, and our relationships with one another.” (Rev. Dr. Stephanie Weiner, “A Crucial Crossing,” Day One)

Philip’s relationship with the eunuch changed that man’s life, helped him draw closer to Christ and ultimately, to claim him as his Lord and Savior in his baptism. Thank God for the Philips in this world – people who know about the vine and the branches, people who know that Christ is the way, the truth and the life, people who are willing to share that with others and walk with them on the journey.

God puts Philips all around us to help us and guide us. You’ve probably had a few Philips in your life who have helped strengthen your faith. I read a very touching story this week of an 11 year old boy who started attending church at the suggestion of one of his teachers. As the man who was the pastor and who wrote this story put it, he was not an easy child. He didn’t mix easily with the other children, he would always take a greedy share of the cookies when refreshments were around. Well, he just really didn’t fit in too well.

It came time for a weekend retreat, and funds were found to help enable this boy to go along. The pastor says that by Saturday morning his tent was filled with people complaining about the kid. He was rude, he was grabbing food, he was bullying the younger kids – and they wanted something done. Finally, someone spoke up on behalf of the child, letting the others know that he was being raised in a rough home situation and didn’t have a lot and couldn’t they all please just have a little patience with him and see what would happen.

A number of months later he was baptized, along with several others. In that church, each person to be baptized had the opportunity to say a few words about what they valued most about being in the church. One said friendship, another said trust, and so on. When it came to the boy, he said, “Well, you didn’t throw me out after that weekend.”

Fast forward 25 years or so, and one day the pastor got an email from this now full grown man. The first words were: “I’m the boy from that weekend.” Well, of course, the pastor knew exactly who it was. The email went on to tell about all

that had happened in his life in the ensuing years, and it had been pretty rough. His father, who was alcoholic, threw him out so he was homeless for a while. He'd become a sort of graffiti artist and did some other things, but after a while he grew up and was now in a relationship with a wonderful woman and helping to raise her kids, and things were looking up.

Strangely enough, or maybe not so strangely, he was living near a place that the pastor was going to be visiting, so they made plans to get together. Which they did, and as they sat down together, the pastor noticed the man was carrying a backpack and asked him about it, to which the man replied that he had something to show him. He opened up the backpack and brought out a scrapbook. The pastor could tell by the handwriting on the pages that he had written those things when he was still a young boy.

The man flipped through some pages toward the middle and there he found a letter and pointed it out to the pastor, who immediately recognized his wife's handwriting! She had obviously written to him a long, long time ago – about the time of that shaky camp experience.

In the letter she told the boy that she and her husband were in Liverpool, England and saw half of the Liverpool soccer team in a restaurant, and knowing that the boy was a huge fan of the team, got their autographs for him. On the opposite page, he had taped the autographs.

Pastor Wells says this: “Out of the ruins and rubble of his neglected and deprived childhood, here he held this precious document, like an epistle of hope from the caverns of exile.” (Samuel Wells, “Love Becomes Fruitful,” *Christian Century*, 9/11/17)

Friends, we never know how the things we do become “epistles of hope” for others – whether it's sitting and helping someone understand scripture, or giving someone who's troubled something that shows them you care. When we do those things, we are Philips – and when someone does that for us, they are our Philips.

Today, on this Christian Education Sunday, we're celebrating our own team of “Philips” – our Christian Education teachers and leaders. Week in and week out they help us know the source of all that is – the vine – Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Week in and week out they walk with us and invite us to strengthen our connection to him. We give God thanks for them and we will celebrate this special ministry of theirs in just a few moments.

But let me also remind you that choosing to stay connected to the vine and intentionally doing it is in your hands. The Philips in life can help, but it's yours to do. Let's go back for a moment to Janet Hunt and her ash tree. She said, “I'm told, that with proper maintenance I could probably have done something to keep those

emerald ash borers from taking up residence in my tree. On its own the tree could not prevent this deadly invasion, but as its keeper, I surely could have.” (Hunt, *ibid.*)

In other words, you and I, with proper maintenance, can stay strong in Christ. We can stay connected. So I want to issue you a challenge this week – be more intentional about your connection to the Vine – to Christ. You can do that in any number of ways. Try a Sunday School class – there are lots of them from which to choose. Commit to read one of the Gospels all the way through and meditate on its words and meaning for your life. Keep a gratitude journal every day – it will open your eyes to the vast richness of blessings with which God has surrounded you. Tell someone you’re praying for them, and do it. Ask someone to pray for you. Better yet, pray with someone else. Pray with your family. If you’ve never done that before and think it might be awkward, well start with grace over your meals. Pick up an Upper Room on your way out and start your day with a devotion. Be still for a few moments and listen for God to speak to you.

I challenge you to do one of those things this week – or something else to intentionally draw closer to Christ – the Vine – the source of all that is and ever will be – the source of your life.

The Supremes’ song to which my sermon title refers is called “Come See About Me.” Here are some of its words:

“I’ve been crying cause I’m lonely for you.”

Maybe God is singing that for someone here today. There are tears because you’ve wandered away from him. Actually, I think God has lots of tears because so many of us stay so busy and put him on the back burner.

But friends, it’s never late for us to come back to him, even if we have neglected him, because as another line of that song says, “No matter what you do or say, I’m gonna love you anyway,” and indeed, God does. That’s the good news of the Gospel – he loves us anyway.

So I finish with some final words of Janet Hunt: “Jesus is offering us an amazing gift in these words of the vine and the branches. We have been handed the source of life itself. Why in the world would I allow anything to get in the way of my receiving it? All we have to do is stay attached.” (Hunt, *ibid.*)

Indeed, friends, all we have to do is stay attached. With the help of the Philips of the world, and out of love for the God who has given us everything, may you and I intentionally seek each and every day to know and love him more and more and more. May it be so. Amen.