

May 2nd, 2021

Easter 5: John 15:1-8; Acts 8: 26-40

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15:1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.

15:2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

15:3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.

15:4 Abide 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.

15:5 I 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.

15:6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

15:7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

15:8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Title: God always, already present in the life of a stranger

“How might we discover the joys, the curiosities and the God already present in our neighbours’ lives?”

“What could it look like to Go over and Join...”

“What does it mean to be grafted into one human vine?”

I remember while I was working on my PhD in spirituality and mental health, I would spend Tuesday’s working at a food program for people who were underemployed.

I would catch the B-line bus from UBC campus (St Andrews hall) all the way to Main street.

My favourite time for this journey was in the Spring. Because at the B-line bus stop was a tree that produced both pink and white blossoms. It always amazed me.

The tree is a Kanzan’ - The most commonly planted of all flowering cherries. A fast growing tree with a large, upright, spreading crown and with opulent, long-lasting double pink flowers produced in late April or May. These trees are grafted on rootstock.

And that’s where the white flowers came from.

The rootstock has white flowers and it produces suckers that grow away from the rootstock and form their own branches.

Two branches producing different blossoms, sharing roots that draw nutrients from the same source.

“I am the Vine” says Jesus in John’s gospel. Abide in me.

And bear fruit – patience, love, gentleness, kindness, restraint, joy, peace, goodness, and faith

“I am the true Vine”

These parts of John’s gospel we often read with difficulty – it sounds like exclusivist thinking.

And just earlier in John’s gospel we read: I am the way, the truth, the life. in John 14:6

The only way? To God?

The authors of John set it up to be read through the lens of the prologue in chapter 1.

We read here of the logos – often translated the Word (a very clunky limiting translation).

Rather when we read the logos we need to hear:

I am the way the Divine, unnameable infinite comes to Human beings.

I am Torah, I am Sofia, I am Hadith, I am Dow... comes to us in all

All light, all love, source of all.

Where Christ is the light that enlightens everyone – this puts us in touch with the Universal Cosmic Christ.

This makes sense of how we can put these verses in John side by side with lines like:

He who believes in me, believes not in me, but in the One who sent me” John 12:44

Friends we follow the way and wisdom of Jesus unapologetically, **and** we walk with open arms welcome to others who are part of the human vine, with roots deep into the source.

Our invitation is to have roots that go deep into our tradition as we grow alongside others who have different branches and roots but share the source of life.

On the way Podcast with interview with Barbara Brown Taylor:

https://omny.fm/shows/on-the-way/barbara-brown-taylor-religion-curiosity-and-holy-e?in_playlist=on-the-way!podcast

For there is a Being, an Energy, a Force, the Source,
That is always, already present

- always already pulsing
- always already loving
- always already calling...

The I Am.

He, She? Has many names...

Always, already...

I enter a room. God.

I wake up in the morning and take my first breath. God.

I smile at a stranger on a bus. God.

And it is this God. Always, already...

That prompts Philip in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles... and us... to get up and go...

Not to a place that is dark or unknown or unseen...

But to a place where God, always, already, is present.

The Book of Acts is a mixture of stories of Christian community in its infancy.

These first followers of The Way (Christians) huddling together, sharing stories of the resurrection of Christ, enlivened by the Holy Spirit.

In Acts there is a movement inward toward the specifics of what they had experienced.

AND there is also a movement outward to meet others.

To Be Christ's Love and Light in the world.

Philip, is told to get up and go. He is told by an Angel (common language of Luke's time of a way that God prompted people to do something), interchangeable with the voice of the Spirit.

Get up and go... So he got up and he went.

And the strangers we may encounter will amaze us.

The second reading is a poem from a research article about migrant women seeking home.

We read of a biographical poem written in reference to the life of Anna who made the difficult decision to leave her husband and children behind in the Philippines when her children were young.

She came to Montreal through the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP), where women work as caregivers to children, seniors or people with disabilities while living in the home of the employer for a period of up to four years. After this time, and under certain conditions, they can apply for permanent residence status and remain in the country as well as sponsor relatives to join them.

Between airfare fees paid to the agency that found her an employer and other costs, Anna paid nearly \$4000 to come to North America. However, once having arrived, she was told that the employer who had requested her had changed his mind.

As a newcomer, she suddenly had no place to live and no finances to return home. She found herself dependent on the agency to arrange for food and lodging.

She ended up living in very overcrowded quarters provided by the agency with a number of other Filipina women. Eventually, she found a second position as a caregiver, but when she became ill, was fired.

She finally ended up with a third family in a rural location where conditions were described as much better. During this time, she continued to send whatever money she had available in the form of remittances to relatives in the Philippines.

Anna is a courageous woman in an unjust system and she shares of the sacrifice of being away and longing for her children.

Imagine meeting Anna on the bus, or in London Drugs or while visiting the person she is caring for. What would you like to know about her, her life, her faith, her spirituality, her resilience?

Get up and go ... Is an invitation to all of us in the church of God.

The story doesn't end with Get up and Go.

Philip is then nudged to go over to the Ethiopian's chariot and join it.

To go over and join...

To join:

- A man who was from a different culture,
- A man from a different socio-economic class,
- A man who inhabited a different sexual identity (a eunuch).

Go over and join...

How hard is that?

Especially when we have developed such a Christian subculture?

- And it is so much safer, warmer, more accepting, to stay in the huddle...
- With our inherent biological wiring of tribal bias that is a human response to those who are different who are 'other' and some of it is enculturated by our environment.

And it's **not just an invitation** to join the 'other', the Ethiopian, our North Vancouver neighbour newly immigrated from the Philippines or Iran or Syria or the Congo or Toronto!

It is actually an invitation to join the already, always present One. God.
The example we read in Acts, is beautifully vivid.

As Philip approached the chariot – he hears the Jewish scriptures being read.
Luke shows us that this Ethiopian man had already encountered the mysteries of the I AM.

However it happened...

It is a reminder to me and to us,

That God is always, already present in the life of a stranger.

The language he/she might use for God may seem foreign to us...

**But it is my experience that if we are curious enough,
we will discover that in each human,
made in the image of God,
is a spiritual seeker.**

Now with COVID this is an interesting challenge, for where are we meeting others in our daily life?

Although maybe gatherings are more accessible to us than before ...

Perhaps you might...

- Join a Zoom Shabbat gathering and experience Jewish worship
- Or Join Zoom prayers at a Mosque,
- Or perhaps more challenging virtually visit a different Christian community?

And here is the invitation:

- Arrive curiously,
- pay attention to your emotional reactivity, practice restraint
- We often get set off from thinking we are right

Barbara Brown Taylor invites us to arrive with a kind of appreciative inquiry...

- What do they love about their faith?
 - Where is the joy for them?
 - What's a favourite story from their faith?
 - What do people often get wrong about their faith?
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Recognise God always, already present in the life of a stranger.

Amen