**Preaching Notes**

**Easter 5.B.2015**

**John 15:1-8**

On Easter day we had our friends Dan and Cathy over for lunch. These friends are avid gardeners. As we sat in our back yard on a beautiful Easter spring day in east Tennessee, our conversation turned to the signs of spring that were in evidence all around us. We talked about the proper time to plant tomatoes and our outdoor herb garden, and about what to plant in the spot where our two beautiful dogwood trees that were knocked down by a powerful windstorm last year around this time once stood. We talked about whether we should put chemicals on our lawn, or water it, and how high of an altitude we had to be at to successfully cultivate a grove of rhododendrons. Eventually we got around to talking about all of my houseplants, which are currently indoors on our sun porch.

My husband told our friends about how last year I had literally pruned every one of them down to almost nothing, and how they have over the winter grown back so much that they are almost the size they were before I pruned them. Cathy said, “That’s the secret! Pruning is what makes things really grow! Our fruit trees are all going crazy this year because I pruned them last fall.”

Her husband Dan said, “No, Cathy. The fruit trees are going crazy this year because I put my special compost on them!” And they proceeded to argue about which technique was more important to plant health, both insisting that he or she was right.

While I know that both composting and pruning are important for growing healthy plants, I’m afraid I have to side with Cathy on this one, especially in light of this week’s scripture lesson. Good pruning is critical to maintaining vital plant life.

Likewise, Jesus knew that the secret to maintaining a healthy and vital community of faith is by encouraging the growth of the healthy parts of the community, and pruning away the overgrown and unproductive parts.

Historically the nation of Israel, God’s chosen people, were the “vine” of the metaphors of the Hebrew Scriptures. But the gospel writer John redefines this old, familiar metaphor when he puts these words in the mouth of Jesus. Here Jesus says that he, not Israel, is the “vine,” or the middle ground, between God, who is the “gardener,” and the community of faith, which are the “branches.” Jesus is the true vine because he comes from God.

So if we apply this metaphor to the people we serve, how can we as pastors help our members grow to be healthy disciples who abide in God’s love and produce good fruit?

Once again I am grateful for having had the opportunity this year to study Rob Fuquay’s book, *The God We Can Know: Exploring the “I Am” Sayings of Jesus* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2014) during the season of Lent. In his study of Jesus’ words, “I am the vine,” Fuquay invites his students to consider what in their lives is contributing to a sense of disconnection from God and what in their lives is helping them to “abide” in God’s Spirit. Fuquay writes,

We stay connected to God’s power by staying connected to Christ. The way to do this is to *abide.* That word appears ten times in John 15. Abiding in Christ is the key to experiencing spiritual power. How do we abide in Christ? Jesus offers a vivid image—be a branch! (Fuquay, 74).

Fuquay goes on to say that being a fruitful branch has to do with where we give our greatest energy. He invites his readers to take a “spiritual inventory” of a 24-hour block of time, writing down how they spent a day. Some of that time obviously goes to sleeping. Some of that time goes to work. But how much of our daily lives goes to attending to things that nourish our connection to God? What are we intentionally doing to keep ourselves spiritually healthy? And what unhealthy habits that keep us from staying connected to God through Christ do we need to prune away?

Fuquay also invites his readers to consider what “branches” of their lives are completely dead, and whose only function is to weigh them down. Some examples he gives are: regrets, living in the past, resentments, bitterness, and envy. Fuquay says that it takes a lot of energy just to keep these “dead limbs” propped up (Fuquay, 79).

Finally, Fuquay talks about the need to cling closely to the vine. He notes that this is not an easy thing, because sometimes we “obsess over fruit.” That is, we think that we are the producers of the fruit, and that whether or not good fruit is being put forth depends primarily on whether or not we are doing a good job. But Fuquay says it doesn’t work that way. We are not the vine; we are the branches. Our role as branches is simply to be faithful and work on abiding in Christ. “Our job is to be a branch and let God’s power flow through us” (Fuquay, 82).

At the end of the chapter, Fuquay offers a list of questions for discussion in small groups. As you prepare to preach on this scripture I would encourage you to pick up a copy of Rob’s book and read his chapter, “I am the True Vine,” as well as reflect upon and with discuss with folks from your congregation these questions:

* If pruning helps a branch say healthy, what does it mean for us to be pruned? When was a time you felt pruned?
* Are less important things robbing you of productive energy? If so, what are they?
* Can you relate to holding on to dead things that don’t have a chance to produce? Resentment? A disappointment? Shame?
* What does it mean to you to “cling to the vine?” Have you ever placed more focus on being fruitful than being faithful?

**Acts 8:26-40**

The book of Acts says, “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” (Acts 8: 26 NRSV). So Philip got up and went. There he saw a eunuch, an important official for the queen of Ethiopia, riding along in his carriage and reading from a book. Acts then reports, “The Holy Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it’” (Acts 8:29 NRSV). So Phillip ran over and when he did, he heard the Ethiopian reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

So these statements beg the question of how, exactly, did the angel of the Lord and the Holy Spirit speak to Philip. Did the angel speak aloud to him? Did the Holy Spirit walk up to him and start talking? Did they speak in words?

And more importantly, did the angel of the Lord and the Holy Spirit regularly speak to people during this time in history? Do they still speak to people today? What language do they speak? Do they speak in whatever language a person knows? Do they speak out loud? Or does the Spirit speak mostly inside a person’s head? Does the Spirit sometimes communicate in some other way, like through a hunch or a feeling or even the voice of another human being?

* Has the Holy Spirit ever spoken to you? How did you know it was the Holy Spirit? How did the Holy Spirit speak? Did the Spirit use words? Was it out loud? Was it inside your head?
* Has the Holy Spirit or an angel of the Lord ever spoken to one of your members? How, when, and where did this happen? How did they know for certain that this was a communication from God?

It seems to me that most often the Spirit does not speak in words, but rather divine communications come to us more often as a *feeling* than as words. So if we were to translate Acts into more modern terms, we might say something like this:

One day Philip had a *feeling* that the Lord wanted him to go south to the road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza. And when Philip got to that road and saw the Ethiopian official riding along and reading from a book, Philip had a *feeling* (or sense, or an impulse, or an urge, or a *calling*) to go over and run alongside the carriage.

All of us from time to time get a *feeling* about things we might ought to do, do we not? The only question is, how do we know when these feelings are simply our own, and how do we know when they are divinely inspired? How do we know when we ought to act upon them? And how do we know when we should not act upon them? How do we discern that a feeling we have is not just nostalgia, or an emotional response, or something we ate, but rather is the Holy Spirit speaking to us?

These are difficult questions to answer. Many people, especially Methodists, might be a little uneasy saying that they knew for sure that they heard a clear message from the Holy Spirit. Methodists tend not to use this kind of language to talk about their communications with God. And even if a Methodist did believe that the Holy Spirit had spoken to him or her, most would be reluctant to share this news, and would more likely be inclined to question whether what they were feeling was really the Holy Spirit after all.

So how come people “back in the day” were so certain that it was the angel of the Lord who spoke, or that it was the Holy Spirit who was directing them? Perhaps we can get some help by reading the rest of the story of Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian official.

Acts says that when Philip got closer to the chariot, he heard the man reading aloud from the Book of Isaiah. So this makes me wonder:

* Is that the way we know that the Holy Spirit is talking to us?
* Is it when whatever is being said or done is based on something from the Bible?

To these questions I would say: not necessarily. There are many people who study the Bible and there are many differences in belief. Just because a person has a strong belief in something the Bible says, or a particular interpretation about what the Bible means, does not necessarily mean that every other person who proclaims the Christian faith would agree with that person’s understanding or call it “Spirit-filled.”

But if we look at the exchange between Philip and the Ethiopian official, perhaps we can say at the very least that Philip acted BOLDLY by running up to the chariot and interrupting the man while he was reading to ask him, “Do you understand what you are reading?” And we can infer that the Ethiopian was not at all put off by Philip’s assertive behavior. He doesn’t say, “None of your business, Buster. Get lost!” He just says, “How can I understand unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:31 NRSV). And then he invites Philip to climb up and sit in the chariot with him. After the man reads aloud the passage he is studying he asks Philip a question about it. “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” (Acts 8:34 NRSV). The writer of the story doesn’t tell us what exactly Peter said, but whatever it was, it must have been about Jesus and it must have been said in the right Spirit so that it sounded like good news, because after he heard it, the Ethiopian official wanted to be baptized as a follower of Jesus.

The Holy Spirit, it seems to me, is between people. The Spirit does not confine its talk to one person alone. This means if we get a *feeling* about something, we probably shouldn’t act on it solo, as if it were a private communication between us and God. Instead, we should try to talk to someone else about it, someone who can help us confirm if it is, in fact, the Spirit talking. If we can find someone we trust, someone with whom we can connect, and talk over our feelings with that person, and have that person question us closely, peaceably, seriously, and with love, it is much more likely that the Spirit is talking than if we run around supposing that we have had a private and personal direct communication from God.

In other words, folks are right to be a little suspicious. The main weakness of Methodists is not that we question these things. Our problem is that when we get these feelings, we tend to keep them to ourselves. We tend not to *act* on our feelings.

Certainly we need to be careful and to check out our feelings by practicing accountable discipleship and seeking further clarification if they are indeed of God. But if we do believe we have heard a word from the Holy Spirit, we need to be *acting* on those feelings! We should try not to be pushy or overly aggressive with our testimony. But if the Holy Spirit is talking among us, we must find ways to share the Good News with others! This confused and troubled world needs all the good news it can get. It needs the right kind of direction. It needs direction from the angel of the Lord. It needs the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

So urge your people to listen for God’s guidance and when they hear something, not to sit back. Tell them to exercise great care, and to check out their feelings with someone they trust, but once they have done so, to ACT on them by sharing their *feeling,* sharing their *witness*, with others. When the angel of the Lord talks we should listen! When the Spirit says sing they should SING! When the Spirit says pray they should PRAY! And when the Spirit says move, they should MOVE!

**1 John 4:7-21**

Love, love, love. All you need is love, the Beatles sang.

Love is a word that is easily squandered by us humans. We talk about it as if it is something easy and cheap. We talk about how we love our favorite soft drink, or we love our favorite baseball team or our favorite pair of jeans. When we hear the word love we don’t necessarily think about the sacrificial, incarnational, Christ-like sort of love that John is talking about.

The letters from John were composed ten to twenty years after the Gospel of John, probably sometime in the early second century. In these letters the author is addressing an internal conflict in the Johannine community. It seems that some of the members of the church had departed from the traditional beliefs about Jesus. These folks didn’t believe that Jesus was fully human, and so the community had become divided over who had the truth and who didn’t. As a result, they weren’t practicing love towards one another.

John, who had himself come under attack and was not feeling very loved by this community, did not respond to their rejection with angry words or vengeance. He didn’t tell them they were a bunch of idiots. He didn’t suggest that since they couldn’t get along and they couldn’t agree, maybe they ought to split into two separate churches. In the face of hatred and anger and division, John preached to this church about the transforming power of LOVE.

Not romantic love. Not sentimental live. But rather, *Divine love*. Hope-filled love. Love that casts out all fear. AGAPE love.

Agape is love that is of and from God, whose very nature is love itself. John affirms this when he says, quite plainly, that “God is love.” God’s love is not a description of an emotional feeling or a strong attachment. To say “God ***is*** love” is to say that God’s very nature is love. It is to say that everything God is and does flows from love. God’s nature is such that God is able to love the unlovable and unlovely as easily and fully as God loves the righteous and holy, not because anyone deserves to be loved, but because it is God’s very nature to do so.

The recipient of agape love never does anything to merit the love that is offered. Agape love is simply love that God pours out on all people. It is grace and mercy, and people today are but a few among the many undeserving recipients upon whom God has lavished that kind of love.

It is this same kind of loving then, John says, that we are called to pour out on others. Because of God’s love, we are called to live in new ways. We are not called to love just the people who are easy to love. We are called to love the persons we had rather hate, ignore, or reject. It is critical that we do this because our very relationship with God is tied up in this love. We have never seen God; but if we love one another, our love for others is a clear sign of God’s love in us and our love for God. For if we can’t love our brothers and sisters whom we have seen, how can we love God whom we have not seen?

Agape love is not a feeling or an emotional response, but rather, a determined act of the will. It is God’s love put into action among human beings. It is you and your congregation making conscious decisions to put the welfare of others above their own.

But this is a hard thing to do. This type of love does not come easily or naturally to humans. Because of our fallen natures, we are incapable of loving in this way on our own. If we are to love as God loves, that love—that agape—must flow through us from its true source. We are vessels through which God’s love is poured into the world. We are branches through which the lifeblood of the vine flows. We are the conveyers of the love which “has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us” when we became children of God, as John wrote a little earlier in his first letter.

Because it is God’s love and not our own that has been poured into us, we are made able to follow the command of Jesus who said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. As I have loved you, you should also love one another.”

Because God loves us, and because nothing can separate us from that love we can push past our disappointment and anger and continue to love one another even in the face of differences, even in the face of pure evil. We can love one another as God has loved us.

It’s a very difficult thing for us to do—impossible, even. And it is clearly something that we can’t do on our own. Only the love of God can bring about this kind of love in us.

But God does bring it about. It does happen. We do witness examples of agape love practiced in real life by real people. And we do know that practicing this kind of love can transform not only one person’s life; it can transform the world.