

## Jesus, Worldviews, and You

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

The Christian life is a life of **good stories** —  
stories of how God is at work in our lives and in the world.

Sometimes these good stories are mundane and unimpressive,  
like a woman sweeping her house looking for a coin,  
or a farmer going through his yearly toil of sowing seeds in the ground,  
or a vine slowly growing and being tended by a vine-grower,  
or a mother or father putting breakfast on the kitchen table,  
or a teenager walking into the lunchroom at school  
or taking out the trash at night.

Other times these good stories are dramatic and even miraculous,  
like this story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch,  
or the risen Jesus appearing to his disciples out of thin air,  
or a near death experience  
when a man's life flashes before his eyes  
and his time on earth takes on a new urgency and meaning,  
or a family that goes on hike  
and experiences God's glory and power displayed in a majestic mountain vista.

But whether majestic or mundane,  
the Christian faith proclaims that God is at work in all of our stories.

The challenge for the Christian faith is how we make sense of our stories.  
What do they mean? And how is God at work in them?  
And how are we to **respond to** and **participate in** God's work in our stories?  
That's what our Confirmands here at Fourth have been doing all year  
[and they will be Confirmed in the second service today]  
and what they [will present]] have presented to the Session today  
in the reading of their statements of faith.

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This story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch is a strange one,  
with a divine messenger giving Philip a very explicit task,  
and an impromptu baptism happening on the side of the road,  
and the Holy Spirit snatching Philip up and dropping him in a city miles away.

The Ethiopian eunuch is curious about the meaning of Isaiah,  
and when he asks Philip how he might understand the scroll he is reading  
Philip's answer compels him beyond curiosity to commitment.  
He asks to be baptized on the spot  
and devotes his life to following Christ.

But before this powerful moment of transformation happens for the eunuch  
he first must admit that he needs someone to guide him on the path of discovery.  
He asks Philip,  
“How can I understand, unless someone guides me?”

The story reminds us that in biblical religion  
reading and understanding the scriptures has always been a **shared experience**.  
Interpreting the bible — and more to the point, interpreting our lives in light of the bible —  
is always something done by the people of God **in community**.

This often means that some who have more experience  
guide those who have less experience.

Although, sometimes this guidance can happen when  
someone who is younger reads the stories with fresh eyes  
and brings something new to light  
something that has been hidden in a blind spot, or trampled down in a rut,  
by more experience readers.

**Either way, we hear things in scripture that we would not otherwise hear  
when we read in community.**

The question when reading scripture is,  
What is God saying to me? To us? To the world?

And this, by the way, is the same question we need to ask  
when reading what has been called God’s other book: the natural world.  
Several of our confirmands — and quite a few confirmands over the years —  
have spoken of feeling close to God, or of feeling God’s Holy Spirit,  
while in the outdoors.

The splendor of the night sky,  
or the grandeur of a mountain range,  
or the vastness of the ocean,  
makes us keenly aware of God.  
But what does this awareness mean?  
Well, this is a matter for interpretation.  
This is a question that calls for the wisdom of a community,  
a community that draws upon a long tradition of interpretation.

Of course, some would say you don’t need a community;  
that the experience means whatever your own heart and mind tells you it means.  
And if you want to believe that individual freedom is the most important value,  
then feel free to simply decide for yourself what all your experience means.  
It’s a free country.  
Be your own judge.

**Just don’t call this Christianity.  
Call it what it is — humanism and individualism.**

But to be biblical, to be Christian, to see the world from a Judeo-Christian perspective,  
you will have to work a little harder;  
you will have to value something larger than your own thoughts and feelings.  
To be a Christian in any biblical sense,  
you will have to honor a tradition of understanding and interpretation.

And to be a Presbyterian Christian  
you will need to be conversant with the Reformed Christian perspective:  
**The church reformed, and always being reformed  
according to the Word of God.**

And, again, to live within a tradition like this is going to take a little effort,  
a little work, and a little discipline,  
something other than the path of least resistance.

Jesus, in the Gospel of John, says the same thing in a different way:  
*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.*

Of course, Jesus did not mean literally nothing.  
The fact is...  
Apart from Jesus, you can do plenty of things.  
You can even do plenty of things that the world will applaud.  
Apart from Jesus, you might even do things that will make you a lot of money.  
Apart from Jesus, you might acquire great fame and power.

But apart from Jesus working within you and through you,  
apart from abiding in Jesus the vine,  
you cannot bear the fruit of God's goodness,  
as that goodness is defined by Jesus.

You see, if you are a branch abiding in the vine,  
then you have to submit yourself to the care and tending of the vine grower.  
And the vine grower is going to prune you;  
that is, the vine grower is going to cut off parts of you that are not bearing good fruit.  
And that can be painful.  
It can feel like deprivation and discipline.  
But you see,  
**the whole point of the vine is to bear good fruit,  
fruit that is good for the world.**

A vine that does not bear fruit is only good for itself.  
On the other hand,  
a vine that bears fruit extends its goodness  
and is a blessing to others.  
A vine that bears fruit  
participates in the life-giving, life-growing work  
of the Creator.

At this point, the vine and branches metaphor breaks down a little.  
A branch doesn't really have any choice about whether it abides in the vine.  
But our abiding in Jesus and his life is a choice we make.  
Thus Jesus can offer this to us as an imperative, a command:  
*Abide in me.*  
And so the question for the one who is baptized into Christ is this:  
Are you actively abiding in Christ?  
Are you putting forth the effort to learn from Jesus?  
Are you accepting of the care of the Vine Grower?

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What happened to the Ethiopian eunuch as he traveled on his way  
was a **change of worldview**.

He heard the good news revealed in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen,  
and it changed the way he perceived the world.

He embraced this new world view so wholeheartedly  
he felt compelled to mark his transformation by being baptized,  
by being fully immersed into a new way of life.

This is what we mean today by the sacrament of baptism [early service]  
as well as by the practice of Confirmation [late service].

The confirmands will embrace as their own  
the baptismal commitments made on their behalf by their parents  
and with these commitments comes a perspective on the world,  
a worldview.

The world is full of **competing worldviews**.

This is nothing new.

This was the case for Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch.

However, at certain times and places in history —  
and we are living in one of those times and places —  
the competition between worldviews  
becomes more intense and polarized.

Today we have to figure out how to relate to our neighbors  
who may perceive the world very differently than we do.

We have to decide whether we are going to perceive our neighbors' differences  
as an enrichment of our own understanding  
or as a threat to us and to the goodness of the world.

To abide in the vine means to let our relationship with God in Christ  
be the primary shaper our worldview.

To abide in the vine means that we **evaluate everything**  
— every truth claim, every news story, every scientific theory,  
every leader, every social movement, every political party —  
**in light of what God has shown us in Christ**  
**about who God is**  
**and who we are meant to be.**

All things are subject to being pruned by the Vine Grower.

Every worldview is subject to that pruning.

And anything that we try to exempt from being pruned by the Vine Grower  
has become for us an idol.

So we who abide in the vine do not have to be afraid of other worldviews —  
but we have to be savvy about them,  
we have to be thoughtful about them,  
we have to think critically about them.

Is there a new scientific discovery? Or a new technology?

What does this science or technology mean when viewed from the font of baptism?

Is there a news story that everyone is talking about?

What are the values at stake in this news story? What would Jesus care about?

Is there a leader or a movement calling for our loyalty?  
Will this leader or movement lead us toward Jesus or away from him?  
Things like loving the neighbor? And loving the enemy?  
And being humble about ourselves and our sin and our dependence on God?  
And being willing to give ourselves in the service of our neighbor?  
Is there a game or sport we like to play? Or a movie or song that captures our imagination?  
Will the pleasure we derive from this entertainment  
glorify God and honor humankind created in God's image?  
Is there a career we hope to pursue?  
What endeavors in life are worthy of our energy,  
and what will contribute to God's good purposes, revealed in Jesus Christ?  
  
What do all these things look like when viewed through the waters of our baptism?

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You might gather from the last few minutes of this sermon,  
that abiding as branches in the vine of Christ  
might have more to do with asking the right questions  
than with having all the right answers.  
I think that is true.

The challenge for a biblical Christian is how to keep our own individual perspectives,  
our own thoughts, our own certainties, our own feelings,  
from becoming an idol.

When we worship our own thoughts and feelings more than God  
we are no longer abiding in the vine  
and are in need of some pruning,  
to humble us,  
to teach us,  
to make us fruitful again.

So come,  
let us live in the vineyard as branches of the One Vine...  
...rooted and grounded  
in the good soil of God's love,  
growing into the community of living faith  
God has created us to be,  
and bearing much fruit  
as God has created us to do.

This is the meaning of our baptism.