

God grows disciples who grow disciples  
Sermon preached at St. Peter and St. Paul, Marietta, GA  
by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, April 29, 2018  
The Fifth Sunday in Easter (year B): Acts 8:26-40; John 15:1-8

*Acts 8:26-40 (NRSV): 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." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.*

*Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?"*

*Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.*

*John 15:1-8 (NRSV): Jesus said to his disciples, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."*

Many years ago, I decided to learn to speak Norwegian. I was in business at the time, and I did a lot of work with our Norwegian subsidiary. So I developed a good rapport with my Norwegian colleagues and wanted to learn their language, since they knew mine so well. So I got recordings from the library and a book called "How to Learn Norwegian in 10 Minutes a Day." I learned valuable things like how to say "Good Morning" and "please" and "thank you" and how to count to ten. This proved to be very entertaining to my Norwegian friends...

Sure, I had the book, but I had no clue what I was doing. The spelling of the words and the pronunciation of the words seemed vastly different. And a book can only get you so far. Sooner or later, I needed to spend time with Norwegians, listening and speaking Norwegian. My colleagues and I had business to conduct with less time for language lessons, and even when they came to the US or I went to visit them, it was only once a year or so. I could get a taste of the language, but it wasn't enough for me to grow as a true disciple of the Norwegian language, and certainly not enough for me to grow others. I never did learn Norwegian. I was curious, but how could I learn and grow?

This is the same kind of scene that we find in today's reading in the Acts of the Apostles. Indeed this is the scene in our lives, curious to learn and grow as disciples of Jesus. The Acts of the Apostles is the story of how the Holy Spirit created and grew the Christian Community. Phillip was one of the original Deacons ordained by the Apostles. God sent Phillip to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. The angel doesn't tell Phillip why he is sent there, but he goes anyway.

The Holy Spirit then tells Phillip to join the Ethiopian's chariot as the man reads Isaiah. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Phillip asks him. "How can I, unless someone guides me?" So they read together, and Phillip shares with the Ethiopian how this passage points to Jesus. Phillip doesn't need to be an expert; he can share from his own experience who Jesus is. Phillip probably became a disciple of Jesus during Jesus' lifetime, but after the ascension, how will others become disciples? How will this foreigner become a disciple? He will learn through his relationship with Philip. Then he will return to Ethiopia and his queen. Ethiopia became a Christian nation, and stayed that way to this day, even during the ages of the Muslim conquests around them. This is how God works: God grows disciples who grow disciples.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus says to abide in him that we will bear much fruit and become his disciples, like branches that abide in the grapevine. As those branches thrive and grow, they start new branches, and the fruit multiplies. Remember that Jesus is speaking to his disciples, yet he tells them this is how they will become his disciples. Christian Discipleship for us works the same way. Like the Ethiopian, we haven't walked with Jesus. We may have the Bible, as the Ethiopian had the Old Testament. But without others who are living in relationship with Jesus, we are like the Ethiopian who didn't always understand.

For many people, learning about Jesus feels like learning Norwegian. We don't know where to start or how to understand. We need some time with a fluent speaker—a relationship with a disciple who can help us become disciples. Thankfully, God grows disciples who grow disciples. We are not alone in this journey, for God has gathered together the church to nurture those relationships that can help us grow.

Unlike learning Norwegian, however, Christian Discipleship doesn't depend only on access to experts. Yes, Christian Discipleship does rely on the Bible and Christian Doctrine and teaching, so we have the church and its leaders and clergy. But Christian discipleship is more than acquiring a set of knowledge. Christian Discipleship is about actively living the Christian life. Discipleship is about a relationship with God in Christ, and about relationships with others in Christ—even others who are also learning and growing on their own journey with Jesus.

Many of you know that I am an avid whitewater kayaker. This did not develop overnight. Eventually, I took lessons from skilled and trained teachers. In fact, without that foundation, I ran into a lot of trouble. But kayaking is also learned in community with others who are learning and growing. The river is always full of surprises, changing and reminding us that things don't always work out as planned. So we support each other, learn from each other and try new things together. When I run into trouble, the rest of the team is there to fish me out of the water and help me get back in the boat and try again. These are relationships of trust and accountability. They require investment of time and investments of trust, but they yield a lot of joy.

Being a kayaker and being a Christian, I can tell you that what I'm describing is but a shadow of what God invites us to experience as brothers and sisters in Christ. In a Christian Community, we can support each other, we can learn together, we can share joy together. We can also engage in the things that really matter together. We can build relationships of trust, sharing ourselves with each other in the safety of a community that practices kindness and forgiveness. We can wrestle with God together, seeking answers to the tough questions. This is the kind of discipleship to which God calls us, and the kind of relationships that truly help us to thrive. God grows disciples who grow disciples in this way.

Many of you have heard me describe what I've called "small group ministry." I wonder if I should start using a different term, perhaps "Discipleship Groups" instead of "small groups." There is a certain kind of dynamic sought in discipleship groups that is not necessarily automatic in a group simply because the group is small.

Discipleship Groups are groups of 6-12 people who pray together, study together, do ministry and build relationship together. They may be a Bible Study, that also prays and supports each other, or they may be a prayer group or a ministry group like the Altar Guild who primarily do ministry together, but who can also pray and build relationships together. In discipleship groups, we can be like the Ethiopian who seeks to understand scripture. We can also be like Phillip who shares from his own experience of Jesus. Like Phillip and like the Ethiopian, we also pass on what we've learned and how we've grown, and we make space for others to encounter God in these small groups of Christians. God grows disciples who grow disciples.

The church needs a porous periphery through which people can come and see, watch and learn to get a taste of what this Jesus thing is all about. But the church also needs relationships that invite people more deeply into a life in Christ, even inviting life-long Christians to dive deeper. If we are true to our mission of growing disciples of Jesus Christ in ourselves and in others, then we need relationships of depth that dig into the things that really matter, where we bring more of ourselves to each other and to God.

We can learn a lot about the Bible and prayer, but we can also seek wisdom to respond to a friend who betrayed us. We can find support when a daughter attempts suicide, or when the doctor tells us its cancer. We can learn how to take a stand when we face injustice. We can learn how to forgive and how to repent, and the hard work of reconciliation. In these close relationships, we can find the accountability that we need from brothers and sisters we have come to trust because we know they love us.

These kinds of relationships require the investment of time, and the assurance of mutual commitment to God and to each other, but they offer a huge blessing. Discipleship groups don't require a master teacher, but rather facilitators who help us ask good questions together. These relationships of depth and trust are places where we find healing, where we gain understanding, where we share joy and laughter. It is like learning a new language—the language of heaven.

Relationships like this require a lot of personal investment, and you might feel as if you do not have anything to offer. But remember, it is God who does the heavy lifting. It is God who grows disciples who grow disciples. Look at what happened with Phillip. He didn't really do a lot. He

didn't know where to find the Ethiopian, nor could Phillip have known that he was a Eunuch—an official with direct access to the queen, who could help the word of God thrive in a distant land. But God knew all this. He simply sent Phillip there, and Phillip shared with the Ethiopian from his own experience of God.

The Holy Spirit did amazing things through this simple encounter. Imagine what the Holy Spirit can do in you and through you when you build Christian relationships of depth and substance! I hope that we will develop more discipleship groups here at St. Peter & St. Paul, and I hope that you will participate and learn for yourselves what I'm describing.

The promise of this kind of Christian Community, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is far more important than learning Norwegian. The blessings of relationships in Christ are far more rewarding than kayaking. This is what you were made for! God created you to be in relationship with him and with others in Christ. These relationships of meaning and joy are what God wants for you and for others. In us and through us, God grows disciples who grow disciples.