

Searching for Growth

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

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Opening Prayer: "Will you pray with me? Spirit of the living God come now and grow our faith. Deepen our hope. Strengthen our love. And water within each of us the desire to be your faithful family forever."¹ Amen.

The climactic moment of the children's movie *Sing 2* begins with Scarlett Johansson's character singing these words...

*I have climbed the highest mountains
I have run through the fields
Only to be with you
Only to be with you
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for...*²

She is then joined by Bono's character, singing these words...

*I believe in the Kingdom Come
Then all the colors will bleed into one
Bleed into one
But yes I'm still running
You broke the bonds and loosed the chains
Carried the cross of my shame
Of my shame
You know I believe it
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for...*³

Eventually, they are joined by the whole stadium-filling audience in the final repetitions of "But I still haven't found what I'm looking for..."⁴

[SUNG] *But I still haven't found what I'm looking for...*

Sing along if you know it...[SUNG] *But I still haven't found what I'm looking for...*⁵

We are in the midst of the fifty days of Easter, where we talk about resurrection stories of the risen Christ and Jesus' encounters with those who sought to follow them. In this season of Easter, we can vividly recall the stories of Easter Sunday and believe in the Kingdom Come near, in the

¹ Rev. Alan Storey (minister) in worship, December 2016.

² Scarlett Johansson & Bono, "I Still Haven't Found What I Am Looking For," track 15 on *Sing 2 (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack)*, Universal Pictures & Republic Records, 2021, Spotify.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

resurrection...for many of us we may find it easier now than ever to believe that Jesus did indeed break the bonds and loosen our chains on Easter morning...to believe that Jesus did indeed carry the cross of our shame...and yet, for many of us—we still haven't found what we are looking for. We are still searching for something—even as we lean into the resurrection possibilities for new life that are the promise of Easter.

And so, this series “*Searching for Something...?*” was born—anticipating that these fifty days following Easter would leave most of us still searching for something. And yet, I do believe that these longings have the capacity to raise us to new life. We have already explored the search for closeness, forgiveness, and courage...and this week we move on in our search...searching for growth.

And I'll tell you what, John's Gospel gives us a lot to talk about when it comes to growth. The first declaration in our scripture passage this morning, is one in which Jesus proclaims themselves the “true vine” and then quickly names God as the “vinegrower,” a poignant reminder that even Jesus found themselves longing for growth from time to time. Metaphors of vines, branches, fruit-bearing, and pruning have already begun to help us to make the connections between the literal growth of plants with the figurative growth of our faith. Jesus drew an apt description of the life of discipleship from this metaphor of nature—Jesus is the true vine, God is the grower, and we are the branches—through this image, two aspects of God's created world are held together, bearing fruit and being pruned.⁶

Before we get too far into this passage of Scripture, I want to put it in context for us—we encounter this teaching in Jesus' final discourse to the disciples, following the washing of feet at the Last Supper.⁷ Its location in Scripture, tells us that this teaching is one that Jesus hoped would sustain the disciples beyond the death that was imminently approaching. Even as they were preparing for crucifixion and death, Jesus was still planting seeds in the hearts of the disciples. In just eight verses we hear the word “abide” eight times and the disciples are repeatedly told to abide in Jesus (and promised that Jesus will abide in them), repetition that draws our attention back to the vine. A vine that is never truly separate from its branches while it is alive (and isn't Jesus yet alive?). It, a vine, is, actually, in a very real sense, usually indistinguishable from its branches. When we look at a grape vine we see one contiguous plant, the branches' whole identity is in the vine.⁸ A reality that reminds us that the vine can sustain the branches, even when we cannot easily distinguish between where the vine stops and where the branches begin. Jesus, the vine, who will soon be gone from the disciples and not readily visible, might yet still be known by the interconnected branches, sustained by the vine.

Jesus declares to the disciples in verse 5, “I am the vine; you are the branches”—and while it may be tempting to personalize this message in our reading of “you”—the original Greek of this text tells

⁶ Feasting, Pastoral Perspective, John 15, pg. 472

⁷ Deirdre Good, “John 15: Commentary 1,” in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*, eds. Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, and Cynthia L. Rigby (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), Year B, Vol. 2: 260.

⁸ Ibid.

another story, this “you” in verse 5, and every other appearance of the word “you” in this text is plural.⁹ Jesus is not speaking to an individual person here, but rather to the whole interconnected community. Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches—branches that cannot bear fruit by themselves, branches that can only produce fruit when they abide in the vine and the interconnections of community. Only those who abide in, remain with, wait for, stay present to, Jesus, will grow and bear fruit. If we are searching for growth, to grow and bear fruit, we must learn that we can only experience growth through a web of connection to others and to community. Branches are never independent but always rooted and growing in Jesus, the vine—and the repetition of the directive “to abide” stresses the importance of the fact that in order to be fruitful the disciples (and us, who are searching for growth alongside them), are dependent on the “vinegrower”—a “vinegrower” who trims away and prunes back—for at some point all the branches, dead and fruitful alike, need to get cut. In a vineyard, the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine as understandably, that is where the nutrients are most concentrated—and as such lateral branches are not allowed to ramble all over the arbor...they are pruned and kept short.¹⁰ Dead branches, cut away, leave us free to unfurl and produce fruit.

This idea that pruning actual helps plants to thrive is echoed throughout the book, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*, which explores reciprocal relationships between humans and the land, by botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer. In it Dr. Kimmerer describes how many different indigenous peoples on this continent practiced intentionally pruning plants and the intentionally controlled burning of the landscape for the mutual benefit of humankind and plant species. Through her work we learn the ways in which various studies have uncovered that American sweetgrass has evolved in such a way that only when it is periodically cut is the plant able to fully flourish. The sweetgrass that is left out on its own to grow free and wild without human (or animal grazing) intervention, fails to thrive and flourish. Not only does the regular pruning lead to more ordered growth, but it actually improves the life of the plant and contributes to its thriving—which in turn contributes to a mutually beneficial relationship between plant and the one who tends to it.¹¹

And yet, like many of you I imagine, I cannot quite get over the notion of pain and suffering that words like “whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers...such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned” connote. Yet, our exploration of plants offers wisdom on even this. The giant sequoia, one of the largest and most long-lived plant species on earth, for example requires fire to reproduce—only when their seedpod cones are exposed to extreme heat will they germinate and grow. You see, for many plant species, fire is required for thriving—and the indigenous practices of regular burning contributed a greater biodiversity of plant life, when done in an intentional and controlled way, as the burning of that which has died and fallen away recycles nutrients back into the soil—the burning of branches clears the way for new life—nothing given in

⁹ Ibid, 261.

¹⁰ Nancy R. Blakely, “John 15: Theological Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), Year B, Vol. 2: 472.

¹¹ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2015).

service to God goes to waste.¹² And even if this were not true—the Greek word that gets translated as “pruned” in English, is *kathairó* (καθαίρω)—the root for our word catharsis—and carries the sense of cleansing, making pure and free from blemish or shame, and if you remember this text in context, the disciples to whom this text is addressed have already been cleansed just two chapters ago when they had their feet washed.¹³ The focus is NOT on the cutting and burning in this text—the focus is on connection and community—the focus is on the truth that we can only grow and thrive and produce fruit when we abide TOGETHER in Jesus. Jesus, the true vine, who promises to always be with us to the end of the age, from whom not even the power of death can cut us off.

And yet, we also have to tend to verse 7, it’s easy to be lured into the promises of “ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” From these words, the false promises of the prosperity gospel, have taken root in our theology like weeds. Seduced by promises that if we only have enough faith to ask, God will give us our fleeting heart’s desires many have been led astray or wounded, left to wonder if faith like theirs is enough, or if there is even a God to ask for anything from. Growth and thriving and flourishing is not about getting whatever we want from God. In this metaphor of the vine and branches, it seems prudent to ask the question—what do plants actually ask for, what do plants wish for? And again, in her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer explains just that, what plants ask for—articulating that plants ask for mutuality and reciprocity, inspiring us with their beauty and feeding us with their fruit and berries, they expect us to take their seeds to grow in a new place.¹⁴ Plants ask for a web of connection that leads to mutual thriving—this is why we grow, this is why we abide in, remain with, wait for, stay present to the “vinegrower”—this is what God anticipates we will ask for, to be cleansed, to not be cut off, to stay connected to the vine, and so also to each other, in a web of connection that leads to mutual thriving. Even the “vinegrower”, God, is party to this mutual thriving—for the gardener’s glory, lies in the mutuality of love and abiding that bears fruit—God’s future glory is caught up with us.¹⁵

Understanding that our mutual growth and God’s glory is caught up in this web of connection—calls us to a story of inclusion, the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8. This Ethiopian Eunuch, who is neither male nor female, neither Greek nor Jew, neither slave nor free, exists in liminal space of exclusion—and yet their story (somewhere between outcast and trusted royal official) alongside Philip teaches us about the ever expanding and growing inclusion of others into the embrace of the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, the resurrection. The story begins with Philip—one of seven called upon after the resurrection by Jesus’ Disciples to serve the emerging faith community and to address the tension between Hebrews and Hellenists in it—who along with most of the earliest Christian community of Jerusalem is in diaspora, after being scattered by persecution by the religious authorities. Having already been to Samaria—another excluded ethnic community—Philip is called by an angel to go down along the wilderness road to Gaza, toward the African continent. Along the way, Philip encounters our unnamed Ethiopian Eunuch, and is called by the Holy Spirit to chase after their chariot and join them. And in the first act of inclusion, the Ethiopian Eunuch INVITES Philip into their chariot and to sit beside them. Having heard the Ethiopian Eunuch reading Isaiah 53, Philip asks

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Barbara J. Essex, “John 15: Homiletical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word*: 475.

¹⁴ Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

¹⁵ Sarah S. Henrich, “John 15: Exegetical Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word*: 477.

them, “Do you understand what you are reading”—and the Ethiopian Eunuch replies, “How can I, without a guide or teacher?” The Ethiopian Eunuch then asks another question—“about whom does the prophet say these words?” and holding in mind the promises of Isaiah 56 just a few chapters further along in the scroll in their hands, that says:

*do not let the eunuch say,
“I am just a dry tree.”*

For thus says the Lord:

[...]

*I will give, in my house and within my walls,
a monument and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that shall not be cut off.¹⁶*

I cannot help but wonder if the Ethiopian Eunuch is wondering if this first text is ONLY about Isaiah and his situation, or if this passage that Philip overheard them reading could also be about them as well—as we often wonder, is this a word of God for someone else, or is this a word of God for me, today. As a Eunuch, they would know full well about humiliation and justice denied—were they wondering if God was speaking to them and their own experience of being an outcast in Israel.¹⁷ Philip then proclaims the good news about Jesus—and it turns out to be even better news than the Ethiopian Eunuch could have imagined. Not only does God know and understand their experience of being humiliated and ostracized religiously, Jesus took on that lowly and outcast state themselves—and when the Eunuch’s story of shame and exclusion is refracted through the story of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus, it becomes a narrative of redemption, restoration, and hope.¹⁸ I want to take a moment to speak directly to those of you who have ever been ostracized, excluded, or humiliated by a community of faith or a religious leader, especially those of you who identify as transgender or nonbinary—Jesus knows intimately what that is like, because they experienced it too, first hand, as did the Ethiopian Eunuch...and this text makes it clear, that the church is called to celebrate, accept, and fold you in the fullness of yourself into the web of connection that makes up our community and we all rely on to grow. We cannot thrive without you. This text encourages us to accept you, and all those who are biologically and sexually different from dominant cultural norms—we like Isaiah, like Jesus, like Philip, like the Ethiopian Eunuch, are affirmed in the call to share the good news of the resurrection without partiality or prejudice.¹⁹

After this message of redemption, restoration, and hope—the Ethiopian Eunuch asks exactly the right question, “what is to prevent me from being baptized?”—and the answer resoundingly is “Absolutely nothing!” whispered by the Holy Spirit and proclaimed by Philip.²⁰

¹⁶ Isaiah 56:3-5, NRSV-UE

¹⁷ Thomas G. Long, “Acts 8: Pastoral Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word*: 456.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 457-458.

¹⁹ Karen Baker-Fletcher, “Acts 8: Theological Perspective,” in *Feasting on the Word*: 458.

²⁰ Long, in *Feasting on the Word*: 457-458.

What is to prevent me from being baptized? God does not want the Ethiopian Eunuch to say “I am just a dry tree”—instead God wants us to proclaim that we are a branch of the true vine, with God as the vinegrower, cleansed by our baptism and free to unfurl ourselves with new life. Recently at Shower Ministry, I had the opportunity to listen to one of our guests share about their first experience with us. They shared that one cold February morning, Elizabeth and Sarah appeared like angels with an invitation to come and have a shower at MVP, and so this guest chose to come try it out. They then described the temperature of the water, that it was perfect and shared these words: that water temperature...it was “like a baptism!” This guest then went on to share how it felt like it cleansed more than just their body and truly raised them with hope for something more. What is to prevent me from being baptized? This guest has continued to join us nearly every week at Shower Ministry and often joins our community of connection in worship—and I’ll tell you what, those words made every ounce of effort that it took to open a renewed Shower Ministry worth it—it is helping our community to grow and bear fruit, by which I believe that God is glorified.

As we search for growth this week, my prayer is that the Holy Spirit gets ahold of us and continues to breathe new life into us and strengthens our web of mutuality and connection to each other, to Jesus, to our neighbors, to God. Let’s Grow! Amen.