

Acts 8: 26-40 (Psalm 22: 24-30); 1 John 4: 7-21; John 15: 1-8

I once heard it said that every preacher only really has one sermon in them, and that everything else is just a variation on that. I'm not sure if that's true or not – I'm sure some of you may have some thoughts on that matter! – but I like to think that if I could boil my message down to one point, it would be: love one another, because God is love. So I love – no pun intended – today's second reading, which seems to say just that. The reading even reminds us that “[w]e love because he first loved us.”

Now, not all of us have necessarily experienced love here on earth. Or, if we have, it may not have been “perfect” love. In fact, I'd argue that very few, if any, of us have experienced perfect love, simply because none of us are perfect, no human is. So how can imperfect beings love perfectly? But God loves us with a perfect love, and calls us to love one another as perfectly as we can, as a show of our love for God.

Now, that's not to say that love is always easy. Nor is it always something we enjoy. I can't help but think of when I was little, and my parents would make me go to bed – because it was good for me – but how much I did not enjoy it. I was convinced that they had all the fun once I was asleep... a fact that seemed cemented in my mind because they would jokingly tell me “Yes, that's when we bring out the pony and play with all your Barbies!” But, although I didn't enjoy it, and I'd imagine the process of getting me to sleep wasn't always enjoyable for them either, they did it because they love me, and they knew it was what's best for me. And the same could be said for taking medicine, eating healthy foods, and a whole host of other things. They made me do them, whether or not I wanted to, as an action of love.

Our gospel reading today reminds us, too, that God's love isn't always easy, even if it is what's good for us. It can be challenging, and sometimes even involves pruning. Just like pruning is good for a plant, and can help it to grow healthier and stronger in the long run, God's love helps us to grow stronger in the long run. But, pruning can be painful for a time for the plant, and it can be painful in our lives too. Even though it may be what's for the best, that doesn't make it easy or fun. But it is ultimately worth it.

Sometimes that love, or the thing God calls us to do, doesn't always make sense in the moment. I can't help but think of Philip in our first reading today, when he was called by an angel of the Lord to basically get up and go to a rural road, which probably wouldn't have been too safe of a task in and of itself. Not to mention the fact that a road is a pretty large place to be sent, for a specific purpose. How did

he know exactly where he was supposed to go, or what he should do, or to whom he should speak? And yet, because of his faith and his love for God, he obeys, and ends up encountering someone and changing their life. Not only that, but the word of God was shared with a whole new portion of the population Philip might not otherwise have accessed, the Ethiopian community. My parents' church has a strong connection to the Ethiopian community in their area, and what a faith-filled group of Christians they are! And the person who was used to spread this message was someone who may have been on the fringes of much of biblical society, someone who didn't fit into the traditional expectations of many, yet who held significant power as the one who was in charge of the treasury for the queen of the Ethiopians. God calls a variety of people, not just those who fit into our traditional standards. We need to work with who and what we're given, and remaining open to new possibilities, because that's how the kingdom of God can expand beyond anything we might be able to imagine. The Ethiopian eunuch spontaneously asked to be baptized, and Philip goes along with him in that, finding a way to make it work, even though it wasn't likely done in their traditional way. There was no baptismal prep as we expect in our day and age, but this is one of the most beautiful and powerful examples of baptism we have. By being open to this possibility, Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch opened the way for a new nation to receive God's word.

We are called to be disciples, bearing much fruit like the vines that we are. It may not always be easy, the path may not always be clear, but in doing so, we glorify God. In order to do that, we have to continue to abide in God and in God's word, which means abiding in God's love, and allowing that love to live and flourish in us. And that love is meant to flow outward, leading us to show immense love for one another. Love without action means little. Though we may be confined to our own homes these days, that doesn't mean we can't show love, in a variety of ways. Whether it's reaching out to our loved ones near and far, picking up groceries for those who may need to isolate, going to get asymptomatic tests, wearing masks, donating to help the folks suffering terribly from Covid and poverty in India, or speaking out against the many injustices and inequalities in our own society, these are all actions of love we can do safely and effectively, even these days.

May God's love abide in each and every one of us, and may we nourish that love so that it blossoms, directing it to all our siblings in Christ, throughout the world.

Amen.