

Stephen R. Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

May 2, 2021

5 Easter, Year B, Revised Common Lectionary

[Acts 8:26-40](#)

[1 John 4:7-21](#)

[John 15:1-8](#)

[Psalm 22:24-30](#)

+ + +

What's the difference between a dry stick and a living branch?

Water.

Water ... and being connected to the vine.

Those are two things we know about here in Sonoma County. We know about vines. And we know, especially with a drought emergency declared just this week, we know about the importance of water. Water is life.

In the Gospel of John Jesus calls himself living water. And in another part of the Gospel of John, the part we heard just now, Jesus calls himself the vine. And today we also heard about someone joining that vine: being grafted into the people of God through water, the water of baptism. We don't know his name, but tradition calls him Simeon: Simeon Bachos, the Ethiopian eunuch. And we need to spend some time with Simeon today.

Simeon sits on the borderlands in many ways. He is a foreigner, an African. He may be a Gentile who's somehow been drawn to the Jewish religion—but many scholars think we're probably meant to understand him as a member of a small diaspora community of Ethiopian Jews. And so he has a complicated ethnic identity: something of an outsider at home, and yet also a foreigner among the Judeans when he comes up to Jerusalem to worship.

And he's on the borderlands of gender, because he is a eunuch. In the ancient world that's a category that could include different kinds of people: people born intersex; people with gender identities out of the mainstream. But most likely what it means is that he was castrated before puberty for his role as a servant in the queen's court. So he has known physical pain and trauma. And he's known the emotional pain of being seen as different than others; not going through puberty with other boys; standing out for his high voice and beardlessness; treated as less than, in a world that prized maleness and masculinity even more than ours does today.

It was also a world that prized physical offspring even more than ours does today. To not have your line continued was a kind of death or extinction. And that was the one thing Simeon was most certainly not going to have.

We meet him in his chariot reading the prophet Isaiah. It's no wonder he was drawn to this prophet's words, words about a man of sorrow who was acquainted with grief. "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, like a lamb silent before its shearers." Does he hear his own trauma reflected in this passage? "He was humiliated, treated without justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life

was cut off from the earth.” It’s as if this passage was written for him.

Now our story doesn’t quote this next passage, but there’s an extraordinary passage just three more chapters later in the book of Isaiah. And I think we have to know about this passage too in order to really appreciate the story of Simeon the eunuch. Because three chapters later, Isaiah contains an amazing promise from God for eunuchs, and for foreigners. It goes like this, in Isaiah 56:

“Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say,
 “The LORD will cut me off from his people”;
and do not let the eunuch say,
 “I am just a dry stick.”

For thus says the LORD:

 To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,
 who choose the things that please me
 and hold fast my covenant,
I will give them a monument and a name better than sons and daughters;
 I will give them an everlasting name that will never be cut off.”

We don’t know if Simeon had already discovered this passage when he met Philip on the road. What we do know is that it comes true for him. As Philip tells him about Jesus, he learns about another man of sorrows who was acquainted with grief. Something about what he’s hearing goes straight to his heart. And as Philip shares the good news of the resurrection, Simeon the eunuch knows that this good news is for him. And he says: Stop the chariot. What’s to stop me from being baptized?

And indeed, what is to stop him? Nothing. Nothing at all. This eunuch, this child of God on the margins of sex and gender and race and status, this beloved human being who has maybe never found a place where he fully belongs: he finds that place in the waters of baptism, where there is no Jew or Gentile or male or female or slave or free, but one new humanity in Jesus Christ.

You might say he's been grafted into the vine. And here is where all of scripture's images and metaphors pile up on each other. "Do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry stick,'" God says through Isaiah. This eunuch is joining a new kind of family, one that has nothing to do with biological offspring, which is good news for anyone who has ever had a family of choice, or been wounded by their family of origin, or for whatever reason not fit perfectly into a society's artificial norms of what family means. In the waters of baptism there are no dry sticks, just green, fertile branches of the one true vine.

"Abide in me," says Jesus, "and you will bear much fruit." And at least as far as we can tell, Simeon does. This one new branch of the vine goes back to Ethiopia. And like a cutting transplanted into new soil, he grows. To this day the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which is one of the most ancient churches in the world and one of the only ones completely indigenous to Africa, proudly claims its origins with Simeon the eunuch, whose spiritual descendants have come down throughout the generations.

What's the difference between a dry stick and a living branch? Water; the lush, fertile waters of baptism, where we are born into new life. Water; and being connected to the vine.