

**A sermon preached by Rev. Jason Cashing at
Clarence Presbyterian Church on April 28, 2024.**

FRUITFUL

<Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; John 15:1-8>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Risen One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

Much to my own surprise, I spent a fair amount of time this past week pondering “The Island of Misfit Toys” as I considered the sermon and opened myself up to the Spirit’s prompting. You may remember it from the 1960’s animated telling of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Located near the North Pole, The Island of Misfit Toys is the place where all the toys are sent if they are deemed incorrect, or put together wrong, or don’t work the way they’re supposed to, or are simply no longer acceptable. It is a place of exile, and as such is introduced to us as a place no one should want to find themselves. Of course, within the story it fits that Rudolph would find himself there as he sees himself as an outsider and unacceptable due to his unique nasal condition. The Island of Misfit Toys invites us to ponder the dynamics of who and what is acceptable, and why they may be viewed or categorized in the way they are. Pondering The Island of Misfit Toys along with looking at and living with the story from Acts of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, I can’t help but engage the question of, “What is it, actually, that determines whether someone is acceptable or not...whether they *belong* or not?”

Because humans have become experts at imposing a determination of what is acceptable or what is misfit, and where those lines are drawn. We’ll look more into that reality next week, but this week I’d like to look, with you, at where God draws those lines, and how we see that played out with Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. And if we look to Jesus’ words about himself in John’s Gospel, we gain a sense that the place wherein God draws such a line is fairly straightforward.

In these weeks of Eastertide, as we approach Pentecost, we find our readings coming from the Farewell Discourse of Jesus, meaning that these chapters in John chronicle Jesus’ last teachings and prayers before he is arrested and crucified. In essence, this is the last lesson, and so Jesus is perhaps speaking as directly as ever, even if it is still couched in parable. And Jesus continues to speak of who he is, and what he has come to see realized in this world and with humanity.

Last week, we read of his proclamation that he is the Good Shepherd, come to call out to the sheep to hear and follow. Now, on the threshold of his arrest, even as he is about to be betrayed, Jesus proclaims that he is the true vine of God the vine-grower. Furthermore, he invites those who would believe and follow him to remain in him as his branches, just as he remains and abides within God. Then, Jesus says, “those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit...” and in this is God glorified.

Do you see the line yet? It’s starting to take shape...Perhaps it will help us to look at Philip’s encounter again.

When we think on the story of this encounter it really is an amazing story. It begins with Philip first sent out into the desert by an angel of God for a specific reason. Once there, Philip was directed toward a chariot in which sat a foreign official returning home. You can almost picture Philip sprinting through the desert along the Wilderness Road to catch the chariot in order to join it. And then, catching up, perhaps out of breath, the first words out his mouth to this strange foreigner are, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

This leads to a whole conversation in which Philip explains and expands upon the scriptures, such that this man, this foreigner who is also an official of the foreign government and also a eunuch cannot help but ask the question that burns within him, "what is to keep me from being baptized?" Or phrased another way, 'what is to keep me from belonging?'

And that would be a valid question, with real-life merit. It is no mere rhetorical query or philosophical examination. This unnamed man would have any number of reasons to believe that he could not belong. First, he is a foreigner; even if he practices Judaism he is not a native Israelite, and as such would always be on the outside, able to draw only so close but no closer. Exacerbating that reality is the fact that, not only is he a foreigner but he is a government official, a representative of that foreign nation and its people. And further still, he is eunuch, which would be perceived as an impurity, a debasing of himself that would forever keep him from a full reality of belonging. 'What is to keep me from belonging?' By the conventional thinking of the time and place, any number of reasons.

Talk about a candidate for The Island of Misfit Toys.

But God's ways are not the human ways, and that is not where God's lines are drawn.

Because Philip's response to this question, even though it is not verbalized in our reading, is, "Nothing." And Philip's response is drawn from his own experiences with Jesus, and from internalizing Jesus' teaching on what it means to be fruitful.

To bear fruit in the Kingdom of God, regardless of the specific way that may be realized, is found in the fullness of abiding in Christ. Each unique experience, each varied context, will have its own unique way of being lived out. But the common thread among it all is the exhortation to remain in Christ. Philip lived that out as he spoke and taught of the scriptures to this cultural Misfit Toy. And in the Spirit, the Ethiopian chose to follow and commit his own life, to draw closer to the Divine and open himself up to the Spirit at work in him. The vine bore more fruit.

Do you see, now, the line that God has drawn, in terms of who belongs? It has almost nothing to do with cultural or human distinctions, and everything to do with whether or not an individual chooses to draw closer to God, to abide in the fullness of the Divine, and to remain there. In this is an individual, a community, an encounter or situation deemed fruitful: how deeply, how intimately it seeks to abide in the Divine Presence at

work in the world. That is where God's line is drawn: in terms of how closely we choose to abide to the grace and love that has been manifested in the world.

The question is no longer one of 'what is acceptable vs. what is considered misfit or outcast?' In that sense, there will always be at least one reason each of us would fall into the Misfit category. When we abide in the Spirit of Christ, and allow the Holy Spirit to abide in us, then the question becomes: "Who's to say what could happen, or what could be possible?" In truth, anything becomes possible. A foreigner may become a brother or sister. The blind may see, the deaf may hear, and the lame may walk. Mountains may be moved and water may flow from a desert rock.

Much in the same way that the Ethiopian eunuch asks, "Here is water, what is to keep me from being baptized?," we are able to ask, 'here is the Spirit of God, and we remain in God as branches of the true vine; what is to keep the good news from being proclaimed and lived?'

To be fruitful is, I believe, more than a tally sheet or a record kept. It is more than a list of accomplishments that can be pointed to. To be fruitful, at its fundamental level, is to proclaim the good news through the lens of proclaiming belonging and welcome. If we abide in Christ, if we remain in the true vine, then we also abide in his ministry, his perspective, and his outlook. Those may not be specified in this reading, but they are evidenced throughout the gospels and the stories of the disciples as they live into apostleship.

What does it mean to be fruitful, to bear fruit worthy of the Spirit? It means to live out the dynamic of belonging and embody the welcome that comes along with it. And in the good news of the gospel, the good news of welcome and belonging, I believe there is no one that, according to human distinctions, belongs on The Island of Misfit Toys. In the Spirit of God, all are enabled to draw close. As we seek to remain in the One who has brought us to an understanding of resurrection life and abundance, let us be fruitful in proclaiming good news. Amen.