

Pastor:

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Pastor:

You may be seated. There is a lot going on in these passages, so we're just going to jump right into it. Philip and the Ethiopian, what an interesting story we have. We have the Book of Acts. If you've been noticing recently during this Easter season, we have not been reading from the Old Testament, but rather we've been reading from the Book of Acts. And the reason we're doing that is after Jesus' death and resurrection, and then of course, His ascension and Pentecost, this is kind of what happened. These are the events, the results of His death and resurrection. The disciples go out and they proclaim the gospel. And so we hear about different disciples going and preaching the gospel. Later on in the Book of Acts, of course we'll hear about Paul and his missionary journeys, but right now we're talking about the early, early Christian Church within the first several months or years of the Christian faith.

And so Philip is one of those disciples and he's going around and God guides him to this Ethiopian. And the Ethiopian is reading for the Book of Isaiah but doesn't understand. And so Philip is told, led by the Spirit, to help open up the Book of Isaiah so that this Ethiopian may understand what is going on. And so Philip starts with the Isaiah passage and then goes through the Old Testament and gets to Jesus Christ and explains how all of this works together for his salvation. And the Ethiopian is so excited he stops the chariot and gets baptized. Now I find it interesting if you look very carefully at the first couple of sentences of our first reading, it says very clearly this is a desert place as if that's somehow important. And I think it kind of is because if it's a desert place, what is there usually lacking in the desert?

Congregation:

Water.

Pastor:

Water. And so this Ethiopian is hearing the Word of God, is being lifted by the love of God, is discovering ... And faith is being planted in his heart and he's so enthusiastic, he sees a mud puddle somewhere. He sees some water and he says,

"Wait, I'm so excited about this. God's Word has so grabbed me. What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He didn't need to wait for a big body of water or some special ceremony. He was so moved by the love of God proclaimed in Isaiah through Philip that any water would do. And so he grabs the first water he finds, and he is baptized because he loves the word that has been given to him and he wants to be part of this family. And then what does he do with that? He goes forth and he proclaims the gospel to the rest of his community. We know this because the Ethiopian Church is still in existence today. It's one of the oldest Christian communities in the world. Christianity came to Ethiopia long before it came to Germany.

So we know that this and other Ethiopians who were around spread the message. They naturally responded with the enthusiasm of the gospel by sharing that word, by sharing the love of God with those around them. And so that's why this passage then is connected with First John and the John. It's all about the love of God and what God has done for us and how much we can trust in His word even though there are times of difficulty ahead, even though we may be afraid and we look around the world around us and we see horrible, awful things going on. And we wonder, is God still present? What is he doing? I mean, the First John passage talked about the Spirit of the Antichrist being in the world. See, we're not waiting for the Antichrist to show up. He has always been here. He's been actively working against the Word of God, Antichrist, proclaiming anything against Christ.

And so even though the spirit of the Antichrist is around and has been around from the beginning, even though there are bad things that are happening in this world, even though we face trials and tribulations, sickness and disease and illness and death, we will fear no evil. As we said last week, "Your rod and your staff, they comfort us." See, "Perfect love," it says, "Casts out fear." And where does that perfect love ... That doesn't mean you all have to have perfect love because unfortunately we cannot do that. However, we do have the perfect love of God in us proclaimed by the gospel just as it was to the Ethiopian eunuch through Philip, the gospel has been proclaimed to each and every one of us, and we are filled with the love of God.

And therefore we can face the trials and tribulations of this world. We can face the horrors that we see around us because we know that God's love is with us. So much so that even when Judgment Day comes, and we've been studying the Book of Revelation, and we've been talking about the end of the world, and the final days that we are currently in and have always been in. And someday we are all going to face the judgment of God. But perfect love casts out fear so that even when we face that judgment seat, we are not afraid because the love of God has come into us and has transformed us and made us into His children whom He loves. And so

therefore, when He comes to judge the living and the dead, He's going to judge all of us as not guilty. Not guilty. You are free from your sin. You are free from the guilt of your sin.

Now, you have been given this great gift in your baptism. Like Philip gave to the Ethiopian through God's Word, you also have received the love of God and the promise of salvation in your baptism. You are now His creation. You are now His children. And you know that because he continually declares to you that He loves you. By definition, God is love and He desires to give that love to us. But wait a second, didn't just a little while ago, I started talking about the judgment seat of God and God coming and judging us. God is love and His love has given His son Jesus Christ to die for us. But just any of the evil, any of the bad, any of the sin, any of the rebellion against God, it brings down the wrath of God. He hates sin.

And we have brought that upon ourselves, when we ate the fruit in the garden, we had the perfect love of God, but we decided we wanted something different. We wanted equality with God. We wanted to know what it was like, good and evil. And boy do we get that in spades. And yet we do not need to be afraid because His love is what he really wants to do. He does not want to punish us. He does not want to condemn us, us or anyone else. He desires to share the love that He gave to us through the cross to all people. So we often focus upon how much God has done for us.

Today, we're going to focus a little bit more upon what we are called to do in response to that. We have been given the love of God and now it is our responsibility and privilege to share that love with one another, to be loving and kind. Now, John says, "Nobody has seen the Father. Nobody has seen God." And then he goes on to say, "If you love one another, God's love abides in you and you and God." So in other words, what he's saying is, "Nobody's seen God, but they have seen you." So the question becomes when they see you, do they see God in you?

That is a real question that we need to ask ourselves. When we interact with anybody in this entire world, what do people see? If they don't see the love of God, then we are called to repent. It is important for us to do good works, to serve God, to love our neighbor as ourselves, to share with those around us, with all good things, to be kind and loving to our friends and neighbors and our enemies and those we don't like very well, and those we'd rather not know. We're still called to love them all. Why? Because God loves them and He wants them to be part of the family as well.

So we are called to examine our lives. Are we living up to what God has declared us to be? Now, the obvious answer is absolutely not. No, we failed miserably in

thought, word and deed. That's why we get to come every Sunday to the table and receive His body and blood and be reassured of the forgiveness of God so that we might be strengthened and nourished through His body and blood that we might go forth and try better next time, knowing that we're always going to come back. But you see, we do not put our reliance of hope in what we do. And that's again why the passage of the vine and the vineyard and the branches, the vine is Jesus Christ. The vine is the source of all nutrients, getting to the branches, getting to the fruit. The vine is the thing that goes into the ground and establishes the roots and branches out and spreads out. Without the vine, you cut off a branch and it's dead. So the branch isn't the thing that does the work. It's the vine.

So when we do good works, it's not us that is doing them, but God that is doing them in and through us. So we are called to trust in God and because we know we can trust in Him for all things, even when we're afraid, we can trust in His love. Because we know that to be true, we can then therefore share that love with those around us. We can be generous with our time, with our money, with our talents. We can be kind and loving to those people that really irritate us because God calls us to be His hands and feet in this world. Nobody's seen God, but again, they've seen you.

Now, I don't want this to be all pointing fingers and, "Well, you need to try harder and do better." That's not really ... I mean, we should, yes, but I want you to understand why we do it. We are called to love because He has loved us first. And because He has loved us first, the love that we share is a joyful response to what we have received and we should examine ourselves. And this is something of a challenge to all of us. Look at your lives today. How can you and who can you share God's love with today? That's a very good answer or question to ask yourselves each and every day. How can I serve God today? How can I love my neighbor today? What can I do that is a good work unto the Lord?

These are good questions that we should ask, but we should ask them with a proper perspective. We don't ask what can I do better? Because if I don't do enough good, God's not really going to like me and I'm in trouble. We don't do good things because we want people to recognize that we've done good things. "Hey, did you see what I did? That was pretty good, wasn't it?" We don't do good works for that. We do good works because He has done such great and marvelous things for us. The motivation is key. We stand on the firm foundation that that Ethiopian eunuch [inaudible 00:13:20] stands upon. We stand on the foundation of Christ giving His love to us.

And because of that firm foundation, because of the confidence that we have, that God does indeed love us and abides in us because that is all true, we can then go

forth. We can then share that love. Because let's face it, this world is a little bit off. There are problems in the world and there are struggles within. And all of that needs to know, everybody needs to know how much His love has done for them. And that's our motivation to do good, to seek, to serve our neighbor because the vine just naturally feeds us. And as it feeds us with His word, it brings forth fruit. And what does that fruit do? Love. How does that work out? I'm not [inaudible 00:14:24] to go through a laundry list of good works that you can do, but look to the scriptures, look to the catechism, the table of duties. It's a perfect way to start. Look to the 10 Commandments. Again, not because you must, but because of the love that He has for you that you get to share with those around.

And that love will lead you and guide you and protect you each and every day so that when you breathe your last, you are not afraid even then because you know how much God loves you. And if He loves you, He's not going to forsake you on that last breath. Just as He has not forsaken you through every step of your life, He's not going to stop, but He's going to continue and He's going to carry you home to be with Him for all eternity. And so we rejoice because there is no fear in Christ. So let the love of God dwell in you richly so that you can be confident of His grace and His mercy, and love each and every day of your life from now on until life everlasting. Peace be with you. Amen.