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Osler Mennonite Church

**The Water is Ready:**  
*Acts 8:26-40; John 15:1-8*

Good Morning Everyone,

I want to thank our worship team for leading us in a new song this morning. When we received our new Voices Together hymnals a few months ago, I spent some time flipping through the pages and reading through the songs that were new to me. I am not especially skilled at sight reading, so I was mostly looking through words in the lyrics and I came across the hymn that we just sang together “The Water is Ready.” I immediately found every roommate that was home in my house and began reading to them these verses because I thought it was such a beautiful way to depict the relationship between discipleship and God. I am still very excited about these lyrics, and looking to share them with everyone I can find, so I’m going to do the same thing here this morning and read them through with you all, using them as a framing point as we dive into today’s scripture texts. If you’d like to keep your hymnals or worship resources open and turned to #458 your welcome to read along as I come to the verses in this morning’s sermon.

But first, let’s return to our scriptures, starting with Acts. Now as can happen with Biblical texts, one of our characters doesn’t have their name recorded in the text. We are told that this person is from Ethiopia, so at the suggestion of a friend I have looked up common Ethiopian names and will be referring to this man as Amari. Now we meet Amari part way through his journey, **“he has made his way to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage and is now returning home”**.

The second thing that we are told about Amari is that he is a eunuch which means that Amari has either experienced castration or was born without male genitalia, but was still designated as male and given the label eunuch. The fact that Amari is a eunuch gives us a lot of information about this journey that he has just taken. You see, eunuch’s were forbidden from worshiping in the temple. Amari had set out on this pilgrimage journey to Jerusalem, and because we know that he is a Eunuch, we know that when he arrived he would have been told that he was not allowed to participate in worship in the temple, he would have been turned away and now he is on his way back home.

I’m not sure how many of you have gone to participate in a worship service and have been told that you are not welcomed there, but I have, and when I read Amari’s story I feel the pain of seeking out a sacred home and being told it is not for me. Amari is returning back from this experience, **he is sitting in his carriage and reading scripture** aloud.

I imagine him sitting there and trying to make sense of the dissonance between what he set out on this pilgrimage seeking, and what he experienced in being turned away. I relate to his turning to scripture, because when this happened in my life, I ended up in a theology degree because I had so much wrestling I needed to do. Both Amari and I have experienced the rejection of our faith group, but weren't able to let go of the biblical text, so we wrestle with it trying to understand why trying to be devoted has led us to this rejection. And Amari is reading a passage from Isaiah, including this verse **“You have been humiliated and have no one to defend you,”** can't you just feel the frustration reading through these verses and going, well who is this about then.

Phillip hears Amari reading over these verses and ends up joining him in the carriage and sharing with him the story of Jesus. Phillip is an apostle and is commissioned by the spirit to share the love of God. Amari is already earnestly seeking God in his life, and is welcoming these theological discussions but what he really needs answers to isn't who God is, it's am I allowed to participate in this community? Does this good news of Jesus apply to me?

After a while on the road, they pass by some water, which brings this whole conversation down to a head. Amari looks at Phillip and asks **“Is there anything to keep me from being baptized?”** Remember when he asks this question, Amari has just been rejected, so this is a very vulnerable position to put himself in again. When you have been turned away like that, it is one thing to head into studies to try and make sense of it, but it took me over two years before I went back into a church to ask if they would let me join, and when I did I went in shaking. Amari is opening himself up again because he wants the promise of love and acceptance that Phillip has shared about. So now Phillip needs to make a choice.

As an Apostle, Phillip is tasked with clarifying the membership requirements of those who belong to this new community. He doesn't have a board to consult, or a group chat with the other disciples to get them to weigh in on what he should do next. He has the Spirit's leading and Amari's question before him – and he chooses to redraw the boundaries of the community to include the person in front of him. They exit the carriage and Amari is baptised in the water.

Now when I read over the first two verses of Hymn #458, I think not just about what it means for Amari, but what these words mean for Phillip who is choosing to live into his baptism in the Spirit as it leads him into uncharted territory, reevaluating what it means to be the faithful church.

*The water is ready; how can I be worthy? Yet God has invited, so I will step in.  
The water is waiting, and my soul is thirsty – dried out by my wand’ring, my  
striving, my sin.*

*The table is ready; how can I be welcome? Yet God has forgiven, so I will partake.  
The table is spacious, and my soul is hungry – wine poured and bread broken,  
prepared for my sake.*

When I think of the choice Philip made in this story I am encouraged and inspired by what this means for the identity of the early church. It reminds me of my first interview with Osler, when the hiring committee was describing the church to me and said “we don’t all agree on everything, but we’ve decided that if we are going to make an error in our choices, we will err on the side of grace.” Phillip is among the earliest people to shape what it means to be the church, and he embraces a philosophy of continual transformation, allowing the community to be shaped and reformed by the people that participate in it. It is with this opportunity for transformation in mind that I will draw us to our gospel text this morning. John 15:1-8

**I am the true vine,  
and my Abba is the vine grower  
who cuts off every branch in me that doesn’t bear fruit,  
but prunes the fruitful ones  
to increase their yield.  
You’ve been pruned already,  
thanks to the word that I have spoken to you.  
Live on in me,  
as I do in you.  
Just as a branch cannot bear fruit of itself  
apart from the vine,  
neither can you bear fruit  
apart from me.  
I am the vine;  
you are the branches.  
Those who live in me and I in them  
will bear abundant fruit,  
for apart from me you can do nothing.  
Those who don’t live in me are like withered,  
rejected branches,  
to be picked up and thrown on the fire and burned.**

This text uses the vine as a metaphor for learning and regenerating our community through a grounding in Jesus’ commandment to love one another. Jesus spends the verses above and below this to root his identity in the love of God, and in these verses delivers a speech on how to create a culture that bears the fruit of love.

This speech comes in Jesus' farewell address to the disciples. He is preparing them for his death and departure. There will be many choices ahead of them about what it means to be a faithful disciple, how they evaluate if they are still following Jesus' example, what to do when an Ethiopian eunuch wants to be baptised, etc. Jesus prepares them by giving them a centering point. I am the vine that you grow out of, abide in my love for you and this world and you will continue to bear fruit. Abba God will continue to shape you as a good Gardener tends to their plants, pruning away what is damaging so the whole plant can thrive.

With this counsel from Jesus, it is important that we as a community take time to reevaluate who we are and how we are acting out discipleship at this time. What fruit are we bearing for our communities? We do this in many ways. Through our church review, community connections survey, education committee's workshops, and MCC's guidance through guests like Randy Klassen. These choices to reflect on who we want to be as a church body and where our growing edges are as disciples of Jesus, are essential to being a living church.

We, like Philip are given the freedom of growing into a church that is shaped by the people that we encounter. It is the humility of knowing that we are called to go through our own continual transformation, to be pruned and nurtured so that we can bear the fruit of love in this world. I find hope and encouragement in the visioning and thoughtful engagement that takes place today at OMC. It is with these actions that we turn to our final verse in Hymn #458:

*A calling is ready; how can I be worthy? Yet God is more gracious than I can conceive. A calling is offered, and my soul has heard it: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly; believe.*

*Sources Used: New Interpreters Bible Commentary, New Believers Bible Commentary, The Patient Ferment by Alan Kreider, Voice Together Hymnal*

**Benediction** (Adapted from VT #1055)

Go, knowing you are beloved by God.  
 Following the steps of the Amari and Phillip,  
 Go, rejoicing in the Good news  
 Go, living the message of God's grace: do justice, love kindness, walk  
 humbly, believe