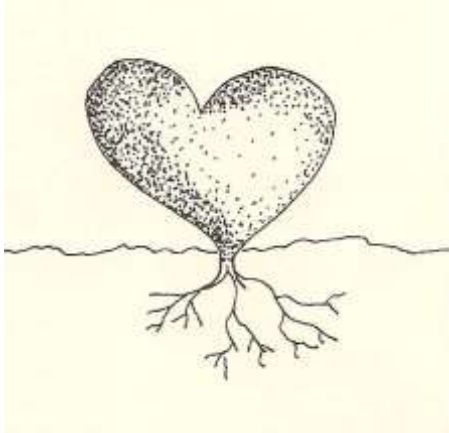


STAY ROOTED IN LOVE



Acts 8:26-40

Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a wilderness road.) So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter, and like a lamb silent before its shearer, so he does not open his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. As they were going along the road, they came to some water; and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region, he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Cesarea.

"Pray, Study, Serve"

We need places to pray as if someone were listening;
to study as if we might learn something worth writing on our hearts;
to join with others in service as if the world might be transformed.

Churches are places to learn to practice, with others,
a continual conversion of life, a permanent openness to change.

(Stephanie Paulsell from "Soul experiments," Faith Matters)

A place to pray as if someone were listening. One of our favorite Easter hymns is 'In the Garden.' It's drawn from the resurrection story in which Mary mistakes the Risen Jesus for a gardener. I'm thinking that the reason she confused him with a gardener is because gardening is what he was doing, tending to his Creator's work of bringing forth new life from earth. I like to imagine him praying while he worked: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Later in John's gospel we hear Jesus saying of himself, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower." Today our place of prayer is the grapevine. Writer, hymn writer, and musician Susan Cherwein writes: 'Vitis' the botanical name for grape, is etymologically related to the word 'vita', life. . . Grapes have been cultivated in the Near East for over 7,000 years, back to the Neolithic period. The oldest known winery, found at Vayots Dzor in Armenia, dates from 4,000 years ago. And the Sumerian character for life was a grape leaf. . . Just under the outer bark of the vine and the branches are two layers necessary for the survival of the plant: the xylem and the phloem. The xylem carries water and nutrients up from the roots, through the vine, into the branches and the leaves. The phloem carries sugars, the product of photosynthesis, down from the leaves, through the branches, through the vine, to the roots. It is a reciprocal arrangement of survival, nourishment, and fruit-bearing. The branches lift their leaves up into the sunlight and into the air; the vine digs its roots deep into the earth and down into water. Nourished by the vine, by water and the earth, the leaves raise their faces to the sun and the branches produce fruit. They do this on behalf of the vine; it's a mutual exchange. (Christian Century, 4/29/15) The vine and vine grower metaphor suggests that dynamic life giving force between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is intimate, mutual, reciprocal, and interdependent.

A place to study as if we might learn something worth writing on our hearts. In his commentary on Acts 8:26-40, James Byasee wrote: ‘The story of the Ethiopian eunuch is one of our best. It is situated here in Acts, but it begins a trajectory with momentum into the approaching Pentecost season. It depicts two very different sorts of people. The eunuch is in charge of the court of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. He has traveled all the way to Jerusalem to worship in a temple he cannot enter—one who lacks all the necessary male parts cannot enter the assembly of the Lord (Deuteronomy 23:1). Philip is an apostle, a Jew, and a Middle Easterner, and he has no access to the sort of money the eunuch does. The eunuch is reading a Bible he cannot understand, hungering for a God he knows only vaguely. By the time Philip explains the subject of Isaiah to him, the eunuch is ready:”Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:38). And the two men, one Ethiopian, one Middle Eastern, one poor, one rich, one Gentile, one Jew, dive together, down into the water, for baptism. What a glimpse of the church! The church isn’t just a place that does the sorts of things Jesus does. We don’t just admire Jesus, or even just worship him. We are joined to him; vine to branches. We are organically united, one to another, so that one can no longer be understood without the other. Here is the chief sign of that union---we love. We are commanded to, but we hardly need the command, any more than a leaf needs to be told to belong to its branch. Love flows from the one to the other and back without deliberation. The result blooms.’ Love is the non-negotiable verb of Jesus’ first and second command. Love is also a remarkable one. For what the early church in its first years discovered was that deep down in the bones of people of little, much, or no faith, was a hunger and thirst to understand the Love of God as made known to them in Christ Jesus. . . Love, not the second kind of love that the world gives, but God’s first kind of inclusive and unifying Life Giving Love.

To join with others in service that the world might be transformed. On the same night that Jesus gave his love command to his friends (whom he called friends because he had told them everything he knew of God), Jesus knelt down and washed the feet of his disciples. He modeled for them the way in which serving one another at their point of need unites

human beings with each other and with God. Tears and cheers rose from the crowd of family, friends, health care teams, donor bank workers, do-gooders, and TV media when Kala from Texas met James from New England for the first time. No words were spoken, just the love gift of hug. The teen bone donor and four year old cancer recipient had been a life saving match. After the hug, the four year old ran around full of life while everyone just bubbled over with the joy at the Holy Miracle of blooming into the best of their humanity.

Churches are places to practice with others, a continual conversion of life, a permanent openness to change. In the beginning of April, Patrick Cage (UCC Massachusetts Climate Change Intern) walked the 12 day Pipeline Pilgrimage. It was a faith-based, Quaker-led and spirit-led walk along the proposed route of the Northeast Energy Direct. The title of his first blog was: ‘Praying with our legs: on pilgrimage against fracked gas.’ He wrote: ‘When you start to do the research, you realize that basically nobody outside the Kinder Morgan boardroom wants this pipeline. You might be an affected landowner dismayed at the surveyors in your yard, knowing the health risks and falling property values that a pipeline brings. You could be a climate hawk, aware that natural gas is a hesitation and not an answer to climate change. Maybe you are a conservationist, repulsed by the scar the pipeline cuts into forests under preserve, or a citizen alarmed by the toil fracking takes on rural communities in Pennsylvania. Perhaps you are a local troubled by the risk of gas leaks or explosions, or another Massachusetts taxpayer incensed at Kinder Morgan’s attempt to pass their pipeline’s several billion dollar service tag to ratepayers, despite the fact that most of the gas is for export. These pipelines have such an ecosystem of problems that the campaign growing to oppose them is one of the most exciting frontiers of climate action in New England.’ On a personal note, Patrick shared that his energy for the 150 mile walk would have depleted quickly had it not been for the shared passion and committed action of fellow organizers Jay O’Hara, Meg Klepack, and Young Adult Friends . . . and for every grass root save mother earth local activist who joined the pilgrims along the way and was renewed by that old gospel tune: ‘I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses, and the joy we share as we tarry there, none other has ever known.’