**All You Need Is Love**

**By Rev. Sheryl Stewart**

Acts 8:4-13, 18-24, 26-30, 34-38 1 John 4: 7-21 John 15: 1-8

Psalm 22: 25-31

**Summary:** Of the two grafts to the Vine, Simon the magician and the eunuch from Ethiopia, the pruned one is at less risk of being cut off.

 Well, you can all guess my favorite boy band, can’t you? Yep, I was another one of the girls swooning over Paul, John, George, and –yes – I even had a crush on Ringo. That drummer was homely, but who could resist his kind, gentle, and very British accent? This was also the favorite song during my Flower Child phase, which -- as you will notice if you see my garden -- has never entirely disappeared.

 If I were to summarize what most compelled me about God’s call to the ministry, I’d have to say it was the difference faith made in me. God was so positive for me, I was -- and still am -- convinced that my vocation was my best chance to make a real, lasting, and positive difference in the world,

 Phillip certainly felt as I do, and so did two very different converts to Christianity: Simon the magician and the eunuch from Ethiopia. My sermon gets personal here, as both men represent qualities in me subject to pruning: to being cut off and discarded.

 Simon had charisma even before he became a Christian. Charisma is more than simply a personality which attracts other people and encourages respect. Charisma is a gift from God which reaches out from you to make a positive difference in other’s lives. Simon had that, and he performed wonders among the Samaritans even before he was converted and baptized by Philip.

Philip was unable to baptize with the Holy Spirit; so, he writes the apostles, and Peter and John join him. They held special worships, laid their hands on people and prayed. The gift of the Holy Spirit – a special connection with God which produces all sorts of positive changes – is given. Simon, rather than simply wanting this connection, wants the ability and authority to bestow that connection. That was his first mistake; his second was thinking that he could buy God’s gift.

 Peter, typically, has a blunt – even brutal – reply. I particularly like the *Today’s English Version*’s rendition: “May you and your money go to hell for thinking that you can buy God’s gift with money!” Wow, only someone whose three denials were so completely pruned by Jesus can prune someone like that!

 The scariest thing is that Simon is a Christian when he makes this colossal error. Peter, of course, was a chosen disciple when he denied his Lord. Peter even rebuked Jesus for teaching about his impending death. “Get thee behind me, Satan!” Jesus said; no gentle pruning there, either!

 Like Simon, even like Peter, I come to faith because I want to make a difference and because God makes a difference in me. What needs to be pruned is, however, exactly that “***I*** want to make a difference.” No, ***God*** must make a difference through me. Only Jesus had the maturity of faith to pray, “Not ***my*** will but ***Thine*** be done,” and that is why ***He*** is the “***Vine***.”

 Now, the Ethiopian eunuch represents exclusion, not by God, but by other people. He is, first, a foreigner. He has a different color, language, and culture than Philip’s community. As a eunuch, he would be shunned as mutilated. However, his condition came to be, he occupies a space between and very different from the two genders Philip is familiar with. Further, he is not a Jew nor yet a Christian. God, however, obviously knows about him and loves him.

 Philip overhears the eunuch struggling to read and understand the prophet Isaiah. He uses that scripture and others to witness to what God did through Jesus; then, they just happen to pass a lake. The eunuch asks the simple, probably anxious question, “What is there to keep me from being baptized?” Obviously, nothing!

 Nothing we are or have done keeps us from God. Divine love casts out fear and grafts us onto the vine of Christ, rooted in God. Love is the fruit which that vine grows in our lives. Love also prunes out and burns away anything unloving, self-centered, or love-denying. Though God may yield miracles through me, my charisma does not give evidence of my power. A miracle (which includes faith itself) is evidence of God’s loving power.

 I’ve told this parable from my friend, K.K. Joseph, before. He was an exchange student from the Boy’s Home, a Christian orphanage in Odenchatram, India. He once said, “You Americans don’t notice this since those who identify as Christians are so common here, but that is not the case in India, where we are a minority. There, I saw a big difference between those who are Christian and those who are not.”

 Of course, we wanted to hear more; so, he explained. “People who are not Christian and those who are may do the same good works and serve in the same community organizations. However, non-Christians are like people living in empty houses. They work for themselves and their own glory, trying to fill up their lives with good Karma. Christians are like people whose father is so generous that he keeps sending gifts of love into their homes until there is no more room and they give deeds of love away to make room for more. This is no glory to them, but glory to God alone.”

 That is why today’s scriptures reminded me of that song, “All you need is Love.” This analogy of K.K.’s is also what reminded me of Simon, the Ethiopian, and the ministry of Philip. It reminds me to seek the divine relationship, not for the power, status, gifts, or authority it may give me. It reminds me not to seek God so that ***I*** may give more. Instead, I should seek the Holy spirit so that ***God*** can give more! As Peter implies, anything else can get pruned, burned, and go to hell; it is love that will go to heaven and take me with it! And, maybe, the one thing I’ve wanted all my life -- to give birth and nurture my child – has already been answered if I have had any part in passing on the Gospel which I love

 So, let me encourage you to keep being pruned and to choose the Holy One who seeks you out. All you need is love!