



"Get In"

BY PASTOR JOHN HILLMER

So last Sunday we found ourselves 'out in the pasture' – green pastures with quiet, still waters – the Good Shepherd "gathered us in" to the fold, the flock. One flock. One Shepherd. Gathered in by the Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep.

Today, we find ourselves in the vineyard. "I am the vine. You are the branches". Abide in me, stay connected and BEAR FRUIT. LOTS of it!

Now I love the vineyard, and the fruit of the vine -- but before we go there, a question. Are you like Philip having to be pushed & prodded; shoved & nudged, to do something?

"The angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up! Go 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 the chariot." So Philip ran up to it and heard the man 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." Acts 8:26-31

I'm like Philip. I've got to be nudged and prodded to get up, to get out, and get with it. But get out of what? Out of habits, routines and comfort zones. So that's one way of looking at Philip – the man, the disciple - always needing to be cajoled, and prompted, and prodded. God's got to "apply a little leverage" to get things done.

But the wonderful thing is, that Philip RESPONDED to these prompts! The 'prompting' of the Spirit'; the nudging of God. Philip, open to God's presence, was sensitive to 'something other than his own stuff'. God can really make things happen if we can "tune in" to something other than just what we think we know.

So here's what I'm thinking. Many churches, of every denomination you can think of, many congregations are looking at 'decline in membership' and loss of influence in society. And many churches and church bodies have adopted strategies that go something like this: 'Our goal is to increase the number of visitors; the number of people who come in through our doors.' Then they will get together at the end of the year, to evaluate how successful they were. The goal, is to get more people to come to our church; and the approach is, to go out, and to get someone to come to Church – to come here - by personal invitation.

Now I like the "personal invitation" part, because it's true there's nothing like "word of mouth". Every business will tell you that "word of mouth" and "customer satisfaction" is the gold standard. So I'm all for personal contact. But think "perspective". "Get in" or "Get in here" is an approach that is authoritarian. It is asked, or stated, from a perspective of authority or power. "We" are asking the "other" to make the move. To do all the heavy lifting. You come here. THEY do the work and it keeps US comfortable in our position of influence and authority.

If that perspective doesn't connect yet, then change the word to "Get out". Same thing, just a little different. Now we are in the driver's seat. In the text:

God said to Philip: GET UP v.26

Then the spirit said: GO OVER v.29

And then the Ethiopian eunuch said: GET IN v.31

But not as a command rather as an invitation. "He invited Philip to get in, and sit beside him." (V.31) Perhaps the mission of the church, is not to "get people in here" (GET IN), but for us to GET OUT. Or from the perspective of Philip, for us to "get in". Get in to the journeys, and questions, and lives of other people; to meet them on the road. Get up! Go over! Get in! God BLESS you Philip! Philip got it! He got in! He "entered" the life, the journey, the questions of this person.

Who was this person?

An Ethiopian (i.e. an African);

A Eunuch (i.e. a genderless person.) - a 'neutered' person neither heterosexual, nor homosexual, but non-sexual, or 'rendered neutral';

Of high economic standing (i.e. in charge of the entire treasury of the Queen of Ethiopia.)

This person was of higher economic standing than any of the disciples for sure. A person searching for meaning and purpose in life. Insightful; gifted; but searching. "He invited him to get in, and sit beside him". God Bless you Philip - he proclaimed to him GOOD NEWS! The good news of Jesus! Such courage and such faith to "get in". It brought joy ('rejoicing' v.39) to the Ethiopian. He was baptized by Philip. The Ethiopian asked: "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" The answer: NOTHING! And in his baptism, the Ethiopian received "life", "forgiveness", "the adoption into God's family", and a new eternal identity. He "entered in" to the life and family of God through Baptism.

It's the same thing in the Gospel. Jesus is saying "Get in". Get "IN" to me. "Abide in me", "stay connected" and "Bear fruit". But these words are not a threat. Do you see how Jesus' words can feel like a threat? You know...Abide in me or else!! – get pruned, cut off, wither, be thrown into the fire, and die! But Jesus doesn't just say "Abide in me." Rather, he says, "Abide in me, as I abide in you." and that changes everything.

The statements about pruning and withering and the rest, are not threats of intimidation but rather simply descriptions of what happens "in the vineyard". A real world metaphor like green pastures, and quiet waters, in the Good Shepherd. When we do not abide in Jesus, when we are separated from him and his love, we run out of juice, or run away and hide, or think we can do it on our own, or decide to stand alone or whatever. Branches don't do that well when separated from the vine. At best they, like cut flowers, have a burst of color and bloom but then fade and wither.

Consider the context of this passage (John Chapters 13-16 - The Upper Room Chapters): Jesus is with you, for you, abiding in you, and will not let you go. And by his Spirit, he will remain with you. Important words for people who feel cut down by circumstances.

And of course, Jesus isn't limited to two thousand years ago, but he is with his disciples today, riding in their chariots along wilderness roads. There are countless examples of persons who feel cut down – maybe mowed down – cut off by life and by circumstances, and the Gospel promise is fully theirs. The single mom or dad struggling to make ends meet. The kid who's been cyber bullied for so long that he or she is beginning to believe what the haters are saying. The professional whose employment was terminated and, despite the headlines saying the economy is at full employment, has no decent job prospects. The recently and unexpectedly bereaved and devastated

parent. The caretaker who is losing a beloved spouse day by day, little by little to Alzheimer's. How important it is to have someone run up alongside and proclaim that promise! Jesus is with you, abiding in you, holding onto you, loving you, and will not let you go. Which means that what feels like a death cut, is but a pruning; that growth is ahead and new life will come.

"Abide in me." Alone, these words are, at best, good advice or encouragement and, at worst, a threat. But, "Abide in me, as I abide in you..." Ah, these words are pure promise, gracious words of presence and providence. Words that need to be shared, whether shouted from the rooftops, whispered in a moment of stillness, or shared in a conversation on the road. "Abide in me, as I abide in you." Thank you, dear people of Grace for sharing Jesus' promise. Your words make more of a difference than you can imagine.

God bless you, as you proclaim the promise.

Live in the promise.

Carry the promise with you, to all you meet.

Amen.