Grace and peace to you this day.

This morning, our gospel reading speaks of

- Pruning
- Removal
- Abiding
- Bearing fruit

But perhaps our more interesting reading is the Acts reading about the Ethiopian Eunuch and Philip.

I always like story-type reading. They just seem interesting and I am prone to picture the tale in my mind's eye. I like a narrative approach.

So we have the Eunuch. A wealthy official in a royal court. And someone who has been deemed allowed to work in a royal court, possibly among women, because he's a Eunuch. Castrated. Unable to father children. Safe. But also viewed as kind of deformed because of this particular type of mutilation. Which most likely was done before puberty so also affected many hormonal changes. So his entire sexuality was outside the "norm."

And this guy is on his way back from Jerusalem where he was worshipping the God of Israel. So he's gone to the effort of a pilgrimage and also coming into possession of an expensive scroll of the writings of the prophet Isaiah which he is now reading. So clearly, he is spiritually thirsty. He's already been looking into this "Jesus/Messiah" thing and is seeking knowledge and direction. And, jumping ahead, we learn that he's also humble enough to ask for and accept instruction from someone more knowledgeable than himself. I kinda like this guy. But let's meet Philip first.

Here's this believer, Philip, who's found himself in Samaria, talking with Samaritan (remember that whole race - people who didn't exactly see eye-to-eye or really like the Jewish people?). But, yeah, Philip is in Samaria, hanging with the Samaritans, doing good work, even with some famous magician guy, preaching the Gospel, baptizing
people left and right, performing crazy amounts of miraculous healings, even having Peter and John join him there to lay hands on the people and call down the Holy Spirit upon them. And just then, God speaks up and calls on Philip to hit the road – a wilderness road – on the way to Gaza. So he went. Because sometimes, you just end up in a place and God uses you for good work in that time and place for a season, and other times God speaks up and calls you directly to someplace. And you, sometimes you can wonder if you’re where you’re supposed to be and what you’re supposed to be doing and just hope to follow in faith. But if you actually hear God telling you exactly where to go, well, THAT you’d better listen to and obey, post haste. So, Philip heads out to the wilderness road. And I’m not at all sure he’s got any plan once he gets there, but hey, God said to go there, so he does.

And as he’s wandering down this road, he comes across this Ethiopian guy reading from Isaiah scrolls. Reading the part known as the “Suffering Servant” in what we mark as Isaiah 53. (You can look that up...) Now the reading from Acts tells us the part that was perplexing the Ethiopian Eunuch as Philip approaches ("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")., but just look at some of the other parts of that reading. Though the Ethiopian could see it was clearly talking about either a prophet or the Messianic figure of Jesus he had most likely been hearing about after his recent trip to Jerusalem, not himself; even though he knew it was about someone else, part of that reading must have really spoken to him on a deeper, familiar realm, the way pop songs feel like they’re singing our story, even though we know it’s someone else telling theirs. He would have read:

“He grew up like a young plant...he had no form or majesty that we should look at him...He was despised and rejected by others, a man...acquainted with infirmity,...one from whom others hide their faces, he was despised, and we held him of no account.”

This is someone like himself. As a Eunuch, he was not looked upon with favor, but as an outcast. He had been in Jerusalem to worship, but he wouldn’t even have been allowed in the temple to worship. Not because of his race, nationality, or status, but because of his sexual identity. The fact that he was a Eunuch made him safe to work in a position
of power in the royal court, but an outcast in the world of “normal people.” And unclean in a temple setting. Defiled. Mutilated. He was indeed a servant of the royal court, but at the cost of his manhood; suffering and alone in his identity.

But now he’s reading this scroll of another suffering one, but one who is really suffering, downtrodden and abused, and he’s not sure if the prophet is speaking about himself (as prophets were none-too-loved either) or someone else; someone whose suffering and death made others whole, healed others’ wounds, punished not for his transgressions, but for the transgressions of others, his life as an offering, someone like a Messiah. And isn’t that what maybe he had been hearing about in Jerusalem about this Jesus guy?

Enter Philip, who hears the Eunuch, reading and thinks, “Whoah – that’s the writings of Isaiah the Prophet and all that prophesy about being beaten and humiliated and led to slaughter sounds just like Jesus!!” And so, the conversation begins between the Ethiopian Eunuch and Philip.

And, luckily for Philip, God’s been preparing the Eunuch’s heart for quite a while to hear the good news about Jesus. The Eunuch has been worshipping God, acquiring knowledge and questioning wise people, and is open to teaching. How many people had God put in the Eunuch’s path before now, laying groundwork for his full belief and then desire for baptism? We don’t know, but we do know that Philip is in the right place at the right time to hear and answer the guy’s questions and then baptize him when he asks for it.

And what about Philip? We know the Eunuch comes to full belief and baptism, but what does this encounter do for Philip?

Philip gets to see God use him, once again, for the benefit of the marginalized, the rejected, the outsider. He’s just come from Samaria, also known as outsiders to the Jewish people. He is seeing through his own preaching and teaching, God’s love for the “other.” All through Jesus’ ministry, we see the stories like that of the good Samaritan, the prodigal son, the Pharisee, the tax collector, the Samaritan woman at the well, the woman Jesus refers to as a dog, and how Jesus sees them, brings them into his
presence, includes them in his range of vision, recognized them and blesses them. Philip gets to be used to be a blessing to countless others in ways he probably never imagined.

It seems that the greatest work is seen in those who seemed furthest from the religious peoples’ idea of the chosen and holy ones.

So, what does this say for us? Maybe the biggest blessing we receive comes to us when we approach those who are least like us. Maybe we are called to be a blessing to someone we’ve never acknowledged.

Our Gospel reading for today talks about cutting off and removing dead weight and all branches that are not producing fruit. But it also speaks of pruning the branches that are fruitful that they might bear even more fruit. Pruning is laying the groundwork for the bearing of fruit. It involves cutting away some stuff too, which can be painful, but which is necessary to flower and fruit. And it does not cut off completely, but leaves the productive part connected to the tree and the root. The productive part, though trimmed, abides in the life-giving part. Abiding is mutual. The branch abides in the life-giving tree, and the life of the tree abides in the branch, enabling it to bear fruit.

And when it does bear fruit, the fruit is not for the nourishment of the tree of the branch, but instead, the fruit is for the nourishment of those around the tree. The fruit is for the health and the sustenance of the community. So we are to find, listen to, fellowship, and share with the “other,” the outcast, the “stranger” who looks different from us in order to share the good news of Jesus Christ in our actions, our behavior, our love and sometimes when the time and place is right, our words. Go then, and do likewise. Amen.