**First Reading Acts 8: 26-40**

*Led by the Spirit, Philip encounters an Ethiopian official who is returning to his African home after having been to Jerusalem to worship. Philip uses their encounter to proclaim the gospel to him. Upon coming to faith in Jesus, he is baptized by Philip.*

 26An 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.) 27So 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 28and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. 29Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go over to this chariot and join it.” 30So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” 31He replied, “How can I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. 32Now 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. 33In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth.” 34The eunuch asked Philip, “About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?” 35Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 36As 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?” 38He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him. 39When 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. 40But 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 Caesarea.

**Psalm 22: 25-31**

 25From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him. 26The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD. May your hearts live forever! 27All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. 28For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations. 29To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;

before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him. 30Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the LORD, 31and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.

**Second Reading 1 John 4: 7-21**

*We love God and others because God first loved us. We cannot say we love God, whom we have not seen, while hating fellow Christians, whom we regularly see. Love toward God is to be matched by love toward others because the essence of God is love.*

7Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 10In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. 12No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. 13By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. 15God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. 16So we have known and believe the love that God has for us, God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. 17Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. 18There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19We love because he first loved us. 20Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. 21The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

**Gospel John 15:1-8**

*On the night of his arrest, Jesus taught his disciples about the relationship they would have with him. Those who abide in his word and love bear fruit, for apart from him, they can do nothing.*

[Jesus said:] 1 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. 2He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

**Sermon**

Is there anyone here who has first-hand experience with grape vines or grape arbors? No, drinking wine doesn’t count. I don’t imagine there are lots of people who have first-hand experience with grape vines but I also don’t think that we need to go too deep into understanding them to understand what Jesus is teaching in today’s gospel passage. Still, I’ll share a bit of my own experience.

 When I was growing up, we had a grape vine on our property. There were 2 metal pipes built up from the ground with a bar across the middle and a bar across the top so the vine could grow and hang on them. The whole thing looked like a big mess because the branches curl and get all intertwined with each other. That’s why it needed something on which to hang; that made it possible to spread them out at least a little bit.

 Without having to get into too much detail about the anatomy of a grape vine, maybe with what we know we can understand the reason Jesus uses it as an image for his relationship with his followers. The image highlights the connectedness of all parts of the plant to emphasize the connectedness in relationship between Jesus and those who follow him. 2 times Jesus says, “I am the vine,” and then in verse 5 Jesus tells his followers, “You are the branches.” Jesus is basically saying that he remains connected in relationship no matter what.

 Despite the great image, this passage can come across as judgmental, particularly the parts about removing and throwing away branches. That is why it is important to realize the context in which Jesus says these things. This comes during Jesus’ final hours with his disciples

before his arrest. During these final moments, Jesus prepares and comforts his followers for what they will endure when he is arrested and crucified, as well as when he later ascends to heaven and his bodily presence is no longer with them. At this crucial time, what Jesus wants his followers to hear from him is that he is always with them…always with us. And it is through him that we all receive what we need to live, grow, thrive.

 So, the central message here from Jesus is that he remains connected in relationship to all who follow him and that, through our connection with Jesus, he will sustain us. Just as branches grow out of the same grape vine and receive nourishment from it, Jesus is our connection to the gifts of God that nourish our spirit, gifts like love, being part of God’s family no matter what, forgiveness, mercy, courage when life is difficult, faith to believe in God’s presence through Jesus, peace and hope when things seem really bad.

 Jesus’ use of the grape vine image is really powerful because it is a reminder to us of how important and vital Jesus’ connection to our lives truly is. The fact that what the branches need to bear fruit will come to them through the vine…the fact that all are part of the same plant together…it is truly a brilliant illustration to assure us that, through his death and resurrection Jesus created this relationship with all his followers, even those of us who have come two thousand years later. It is a tangible image of an invisible, yet real relationship that Christ has established with us.

 And yet…there’s more! In addition to conveying our connection to Christ, this image also conveys a connection in relationship with one another. It’s kinda like a, “we’re all in this together,” image. When Jesus says, “I am the vine, YOU are the branches,” he indicates that we’re all part of the same plant. Now we can’t stretch the image too far because I don’t know of any case of branches being able to help each other. But the image of us all being part of the same plant underscores the message that we, too, are interconnected.

 It is important for us to remember this because sometimes, as well meaning as we might be in focusing on our relationship with Christ, we don’t do that in exclusion of our relationship with those around us. And, again, I don’t think this image can be taken too literally so as to indicate that only we in this room are interconnected or only Christians are interconnected in relationship. I would say that Jesus lifts up, encourages us in understanding ourselves as interconnected in relationship with other Christians, other people. Our faith is not

individualistic, only about “me,” it is communal, about how “I,” how each of us acts in relationship to one another.

 This is where there is great overlap between the Scouts and the work of Jesus’ followers. Scouts are taught to be helpful, to do service in their community…we’ve already experienced their interest in being helpful to us. As Jesus’ followers, we are called to see our lives in connection to others around us and where there are people who need help, we are called to see them, to serve them. The life of all of humanity is interconnected, and our source of true life is in the love of God, that comes to us through Jesus the vine. That love not only nourishes our lives but is a gift that enables us to love and serve those around us.

 Although we are all interconnected in relationship, it is the relationships with those to whom we are most closely connected that we attend to most frequently through the grace and love of Christ the vine. We at Lord of Life are pleased to be interconnected with the Scout groups here today. We look forward to any opportunities that may arise that allow us to work together so that more people in our community can feel valued, cared for, connected. Amen.