

"On a Wilderness Road"

A meditation based on Acts 8:26-40 and John 15:1-8

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Once upon a time, a young seminarian was making his way south from his home in Oregon to his first year of graduate school in Claremont. The trip inevitably took him through central California, past acres of grapevines, each strung along wire frames, and, at that time in the year, bare and fruitless. Never having seen such a stark site in his lush Oregon landscape, he exclaimed, "Someone must have planted these things upside down!" The first time this native Californian heard him describe grapevines in this way, I knew we had a live one, and could probably also convince him to eat olives, fresh off the tree! But that's another story...

Upside down plantings...that is indeed what out-of-season grapevines can look like at first glance...roots up pointing to the sky, luscious fruit (if there is any to be had) must be buried deep in the soil. Yet, to those of us who have come to expect that watery fruit to grow on the vine, or have enjoyed the juice in its various forms, know that, sooner or later, the apparently dead-looking vines will produce large green leaves that will come to shelter the emerging grapes. Yet each time it happens, it seems a delightful surprise! I watch this surprising process of creative transformation happen each year about this time on a grapevine planted long ago on the bank outside our home...and I wonder as I read today's gospel lesson, if Jesus used the grapevine metaphor to illustrate the potential surprises that meet us along life's way.

The setting for these words about vines and grapes and bearing fruit is interesting. Just before this teaching, at the end of chapter 14, Jesus has finished the last supper with his disciples and is ready to move on. "Rise," Jesus says, "let us be on our way." But in the very next verse, which begins our reading for today, Jesus returns to his long farewell speech, full of instructions and encouragement for the disciples. Let us rise and be going...but...wait just a minute... One commentary author, writing in the book, *Texts for Preaching*, notes the significance of the connection of these two topically disparate sections of scripture: "Jesus' words are a call to get moving. The talk about the indwelling between Jesus and the disciples is not meant for a community at rest that has settled in for business as usual, but for a community engaged in service, a community whose distinctiveness from the world evokes the world's distrust and [even] hatred." Jesus' earlier command to "rise up" puts us, who are connected to him by virtue of the grapevine imagery, puts us in motion with him, puts us in mission and in service, and in works that bear witness and bear fruit all at the same time. And while in motion, or so it seems from the passage today, while in motion, we will be surprised by God, just as the apparently withering vine is surprised by the grapes that grow on it. Perhaps, by using the imagery of grapevines, Jesus meant to teach us that these surprises, these unexpected tastes of life from seemingly lifeless roots in the sky, can, in fact, be both nourishing and delectable!

Such certainly was the case for that Ethiopian eunuch we read about today. On that wilderness road, dry, dusty, lifeless, in the most unlikely of places, the man's own life was renewed, refreshed, even perhaps resurrected. What a surprise! Here was a man who was wealthy enough to travel in style, educated enough to read Greek, devout enough to study the prophet Isaiah, and humble enough to know that he needed help understanding what he has been reading. As one author notes, this Ethiopian is also hospitable; when Philip runs alongside

and speaks to him, the Ethiopian invites the talkative pedestrian to join him in his chariot. For a modern parallel, imagine a diplomat in Washington, D.C., inviting a street preacher to join her in her late model Lexus for a little Bible study.

Yet for all his upward-mobility status, the Ethiopian is without honor in his time. As a eunuch, a castrated male servant in the court of a foreign queen, this man was expected to perform social functions for royalty. He was banned by surgery from enjoying family life himself, and, according to the levitical law code, was part of an outcast group seen as scarred, defective, and unable to be fruitful and multiply. Philip does not question or condemn the eunuch's social status, national affiliation, ethnicity, gender, or sexual condition. He simply listens attentively, addresses the man's honest questions, and then, surprisingly, bends the law of the land to meet the man's spiritual need. "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" the Ethiopian asks Philip after hearing Philip's recitation of the gospel story. When we think about it, there were actually quite a few things that could have been thrown up as roadblocks to prevent this Ethiopian eunuch from being baptized. He was living in Ethiopia, for one thing, so he was cut off from the land of Israel. He was a eunuch and thus in violation of the purity code. He was a member of the cabinet of the Ethiopian queen, therefore loyal to the wrong sovereign. From the perspective of the narrow rule of law, the man belonged to the wrong nation, held the wrong job, and possessed the wrong sexuality. But, as Thomas Long notes in the commentary entitled, *Feasting on the Word*,

"Philip heard the voice of the Holy Spirit speak a different answer to the man's question. 'What is to prevent me from being baptized?' asked the eunuch. 'Absolutely nothing,' whispered the Spirit. 'Absolutely nothing,' [repeated Philip]. So the eunuch commanded the chariot to stop, and he was baptized right on the spot. Walls of prejudice and prohibition that had stood for generations came tumbling, blown down by the breath of

God's Holy Spirit, and another person who felt lost and humiliated was found and restored in the wideness of God's grace..."

What grace surprised the Ethiopian on this winding wilderness road!

The wilderness journey of Philip and the Ethiopian reminds me of other labyrinthian pathways, and of the first time I walked a labyrinth's circuitous route. It was many years ago, while we were living in San Diego, and I'd been excited to hear that a local church had just purchased one of those large expensive canvas labyrinths—with the same four quadrant design as on the outdoor labyrinth at the University of Redlands. This congregation had set up the painted canvas labyrinth in their social hall, free for the walking. When I arrived at my appointed time, a friend of mine was sitting as an attendant. Candles lined the perimeter of the labyrinth, and soft classical music played in the background. My friend gave little instruction, only welcomed me, and showed me where to enter. She assured me there was one path in and the same path out, and that, should I get confused along the way, I would either end up in the middle or back at the entrance. Then she sat down and picked up her book to read.

There was nothing else for me to do but start on this winding walk. The first few steps were encouraging, as they brought me ever closer to the center, which was, I thought, the goal. Then the path wound back to the perimeter...darn...like life's pathway, waxing toward and waning away from illumination. As I walked, no pressing needs or pertinent questions plagued me. No people danced through my thoughts. I recall being somewhat singularly focused on doing this the right way...on carefully stepping so as to stay on the path. I didn't want to embarrass myself in front of my friend—who would look up from her reading every so often—and, at that point in my life, staying on the path was the least embarrassing, most comfortable thing to do. So step by careful step, I eventually made my way to the center, and had read enough about these labyrinths to know that it was in the center where illumination

would occur. I stood waiting. I sat in each of the little flowerets...waiting. I walked around inside the center, hoping and waiting for that promised illumination. I prayed. I waited. Nothing. No profound thoughts. No nascent visions. No answers of any kind. Just, well, blank nothing. Disappointed, I started my walk out from the center, stepping just as carefully so as to stay on the prescribed path, and in a few minutes, was being embraced by my friend as I exited this first labyrinth walk. She invited me to sit down and asked me what I had noticed on the walk. Feeling like a failure, I said that I'd really noticed nothing, I was so focused on staying on that narrow painted pathway. She gently asked, "Sharon, is that what you do in your life as well?" Like a bolt of lightening, or like an unexpected teacher who appears on a lonely wilderness road, not while standing expectantly in the center of the labyrinth, but while sitting in an uncomfortable metal folding chair, illumination surprised me. Just as promised, the labyrinth walk surprised me with the insight of how rigid I had become, how rules-oriented living had crowded out the loving and nurturing self others had come to expect of me. And in that same flash of surprising insight, I resolved to take this learning and to change.

Truth be told, we know not where the road of life will take us. When in the wilderness, we long for refreshing streams of water. When at the heights of busyness and purpose, we long for solitude. We grumble and complain, but we also give thanks and enjoy the journey. May we, like the ones who feast on those delightful grapes from the seemingly dead vine, and like that Ethiopian traveler on the wilderness road, may we be open enough to welcome the surprises along the way as the gifts from God that they can be. May we listen and learn, communicate and be challenged, may we even invite the surprise—foreign, unfamiliar, and dusty as it may appear—to sit right down beside us in our chariot and have a chat. For we never really can predict, can we, where and in what form God will next meet us on the wilderness road...

Amen and Blessed Be!