

The Wilderness Road  
June 20, 2010  
United Church of Gainesville  
Vince Amlin

One year around Thanksgiving my father was sent to the fish market for \$25 dollars worth of shrimp. What he returned with was 25 pounds of shrimp, at a cost which he still has not disclosed to my mother. Whether that was an accident or not, no one is quite sure, but it is certainly in keeping with his personality to have done it on purpose. My father practices extravagance and nowhere more so than in the kitchen. If we are planning to have grilled cheese for lunch, Dad will go to the store and get 5 of the best kinds of cheese and 4 different loaves of bread, all to make 6 sandwiches. It's something like a reverse feeding of the 5000. Cooking is an art which relies on the balance of ingredients, but as good a cook as he is, my dad believes that if two cups of mushrooms is good, 4 cups will be twice as good. Recently he made butter pecan ice cream for us and decided to triple the amount of nuts called for. The increased salt from the extra nuts kept the ice cream from fully freezing, so we slurped spoonfuls of melty goodness and discovered a mouthful of pecans in every bite. Dad's extravagance sometimes leads to disaster and sometimes to deliciousness and often to both, but I have come to appreciate that extravagance, to understand it along the lines of the woman with the alabaster jar, not as a waste, but as a desire to give those he loves more of the good stuff.

I say I have come to appreciate it, but I still have a hard time practicing it. I seem to be built in a somewhat different way. I am not a naturally extravagant person, or even a naturally generous one. I am not entirely miserly or withholding, but at my core I am a saver, not a spender; I follow recipes to a T, with no room for an extra pinch of something special. I have been heard to say things like, "Why do I need two pairs of jeans? I only have one pair of legs." In my first apartment, when I was finally grocery shopping for myself, I cut out all of what I called the "luxury items" from my list. This was anything that wasn't absolutely necessary. Luxury items included butter, cheese, yogurt, pickles, olives, condiments, snacks, desserts, drinks, spices, and a whole host of other items. The two things I ate were pasta with tomato sauce and beans and rice, both seasoned with the same random spice mix I had inherited from a previous roommate. It's not that I'm cheap, necessarily. As Rachelle is likely tired of hearing me say, "It's not about the money." I think, at best, that reservation or conservation in me is

about a desire for simplicity and efficiency, for resources to be used responsibly. I am nothing if not efficient, but I am learning that sometimes life calls for more than efficiency.

Before I started seminary, I worked as the director of a food pantry in Chicago which served 700-800 people a month. As the new, young leader with a staff of volunteers made up mostly of retirees and a few folks with mental and physical disabilities, I saw inefficiency everywhere, and I made it my mission to eradicate it. Why, I asked myself, did we have a blind man sorting cans? Why was the food laid out in no relationship to how it went into the bags and boxes we handed out? Why was the grant money for new shelves sitting in a bank account unspent? Within three months we had renovated the entire pantry, found jobs for everyone that fit their skills, and drastically reduced the time it took to do our work. Mondays were our delivery days when we unloaded, sorted, and shelved 2000-3000 pounds of food. When I got there this had taken 4 or 5 hours, and within a few months it was more like 3. But then something strange happened: no one left. Instead of taking off when the food was up on the shelves, volunteers would re-sweep the floor, or subtly refine the shelving system, or just grab another cup of coffee. They stood around and talked, about their lives, about Chicago, about hunger. And after an hour or two they left. The first few times this happened, I would walk anxiously around the pantry with nothing to do, saying things like, "Well, I think we're in good shape," or, "looks like we're ready for Wednesday," but no one took the bait. Finally, I would say, "You know, you're welcome to leave," and I would get some vague response about making sure we had enough scratch paper or checking to see whether all the pens were working. After a few weeks, I realized that my friends at the pantry were teaching me something about our work together. We were not there just to feed the folks who came through the doors on Wednesday, but we were there to feed each other with friendship and wasted time. They were teaching me the goodness of inefficiency and the extravagance of love.

It is a lesson I am still trying to learn, and one which I believe is demonstrated in the story of Philip on the wilderness road. I pulled out these two tiny verses from a very interesting and popular story, because they are so often overlooked. In fact, in my four commentaries on the book of Acts, these verses are not mentioned once. Every commentator skips over them on the way to the story which follows, a beautiful story about the widening circle of love and acceptance in the early Church, but before we get there, Philip has to walk the wilderness road. And this makes no sense. To give you some context, this story

takes place at the beginning of the life of the Church, Jesus has died, and come back, and is gone again, and he leaves his followers with the charge to spread the good news to the ends of the earth. At Pentecost, which we celebrated a couple weeks ago, 3000 people are converted, Philip has just been preaching in Samaria, a capital city, and he's been very successful. This crazy little sect is starting to build a head of steam, and then an angel comes and sends Philip out into the wilderness, out onto a road less traveled to wait and see who shows up.

There are a hundred things that Philip could do which would be more useful, more productive for the growth of the young Church. He could knock on doors or host potlucks in Jerusalem; he could continue his ministry in Samaria, making sure the new members get fully integrated into the flock; he could convene a meeting of all the disciples for some strategic planning. Any of these would be much more helpful, a much better use of the limited resources of this fledgling revolution, than heading out onto the wilderness road, but the angel comes, and Philip leaves. And as if to confirm the naysayers among us, the only person who Philip ends up meeting on this road is an Ethiopian eunuch, two things which would seem to disqualify him from being part of the people of God. There are warnings against foreigners throughout scripture, and I'm sure everyone knows what Deuteronomy 23:1 says about eunuchs. No? Deuteronomy 23:1, "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord." I don't think it ever showed up under Tebow's eyes. This is bad news for eunuchs, and bad news for Philip. It seems the trip to the wilderness is entirely wasted. But of course, if you've been at UCG more than once you know how God feels about those whom no one else accepts, so Philip and the eunuch inexplicably find a puddle in the middle of the desert, and the eunuch asks the great question, "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" and the Church is forever changed...eventually...some day.

Now you may not see this as the wasteful inefficiency of divine love. There are lots of other ways to read it. You may say, "yes he only finds the eunuch, but because he finds the eunuch millions of others are welcomed into the Church," or the New Testament scholars among you may argue, "Ethiopia was thought to be at the southern end of the world, so the author has placed an Ethiopian in the text to show that the disciples were following Jesus' instructions," or you Old Testament scholars might say, "he is alluding to the prophet Isaiah, who says that the foreigner and the eunuch will not be cut off (pun intended by Isaiah)." But I want to believe, as true as these other explanations may be, I want to believe that God's love is so great, that this foreign eunuch outcast merits the visit of an angel,

the long walk from Samaria to Gaza, the opportunity cost of all the work Philip could be doing. I want to believe that God cares so much, that all of this wasteful extravagance is enacted for this one dear soul. I want to believe it, and I do believe it, because it just sounds like the kind of thing that the God I know would do.

The UCC preacher, Lillian Daniel, seems to be speaking about that same God, when she compares the ministry of the Church to her daughter's elementary school musical, at which the program read, "This musical was originally written for 15 actors, but it has been adapted to accommodate our cast of 206." Daniel explains, "We're called to be like the volunteer geniuses behind the elementary school musical that took a play with 15 parts and creatively made room for 206. We take a task that we could simply pay someone to do, and we divide it into fifteen parts so that everyone has a job. Is it efficient? No. Not if all you care about is getting the job done. But in the church we should care less about getting the job done and more about the people doing it. We are not in the efficiency business," she says, "We are in the business of making disciples."

In the new members' group that we've been doing for the past six months, I go with each class of new members to St. Francis House, and we serve dinner to the residents there. We make much of the food at home, but each time we also make a salad together, and each time I tell them, even though it would be easier to bring precut, prewashed bags of lettuce, and already grated carrots, and pre-diced tomatoes, let's not. Let's bring whole vegetables and chop them up together, and we do. It's a deal we make with one another, to do the inefficient thing. It's a thin ruse we allow ourselves for the reward of that time together. When I was talking to him about this, Andy Bachmann said something great to me which I am probably going to misquote. He said, "mission work is like having the sex talk with your teenager while driving, it gives you both something else to focus on while the real work is happening." There is a mission beneath the mission when you're in this business.

If our only mission were to feed people, it would be easier to buy bags of salad. Heck, it would be easier to pay a catering company to feed people for us. If we really wanted to be efficient about things, we could have the people who make the most money work that hour or two they were going to volunteer, and then they could hire two or three people to volunteer for them. That would be much more productive, two or three people volunteering instead of one. In fact we could be even more efficient, we could cut out the salad altogether, find whatever foods provide the most calories per dollar and buy more of them. You

know how expensive red and yellow peppers are? Sure they look great on top of a salad, but why such waste? They could be sold and the money spent to buy a lot more food. There are many ways to make our service more efficient, to make our lives more efficient, and maybe some of them are good. I certainly find some these arguments at least tempting. But I am starting to be convinced by Lillian Daniel, and by my volunteers at the pantry, and by my extravagant dad that our mission is not simply to feed people, but to love them; that we are not in the efficiency business, but in the business of following, even imperfectly, the way of Jesus. And that's a very wasteful business with a very inefficient leader.

Today we celebrate Father's Day, but I received this week the July/ August edition of the Atlantic monthly which declares on its cover, "The End of Men." Bad news for me, I guess. The article catalogs all the ways that men have become extraneous. They are now the minority in the American workforce and even in management positions, more women are going to college than men, and, as I judge we have long known here, but the Atlantic is only now realizing, women can do everything as well as men can. In a similar series on NPR a year or two ago, scientists explained how, with new technologies, children can even be created using only genetic material from women. So, in some sense, the series concluded, men are no longer necessary. And perhaps this is true.

But whatever gave us the idea that any of us were necessary; that any of this is necessary? Are red and yellow peppers necessary? Are perfectly ripe peaches necessary? Are flowers? Are freckles? Is laughter necessary? Are extra innings? Is art? Is friendship? Is goodness necessary? Is music necessary? Is beauty necessary? Is love necessary? No! None of us is necessary; we are all luxury items. None of this is necessary; it is all just wasteful gift.