

She is homeless. Everything she owns she carries with her in two shopping carts. Once a month, on a Wednesday, she brings them up a steep hill to a clinic, lashing them alternately to parking meters with a belt. She ties one, pushes the other up to the next meter, ties that one, goes back for the first, moves it up, and so on, until she reaches the clinic door.

She has a monthly appointment with a physician there who is the head of the department of family medicine at an outstanding medical school. At the clinic he welcomes her into his office. Her speech is often rambling, her clothing dirty; she is unkempt. He is not troubled by this. He is as courteous and respectful of her as he is of any patient. He listens and does what he can to help her in her life. He does not try to fix her; he is, simply, with her.

After he had been seeing her for some time, he was surprised to learn that she would sometimes come to the clinic on days when she did not have an appointment and he was not even there. She seemed to know somehow that it was not her day to see him. He and his staff were puzzled by this, until they figured out that all she wanted was to stand in the doorway of his office. She would stand and look in, slowly move her right foot over the threshold, and then out again, again and again, until she seemed to be satisfied. Then she would turn and leave, without a word.

She came just to see, to be close to the place where they sat and talked. In that way to be connected with one who received her, listened, valued her as a human being. She came to soak in his presence in a place that had become for her a holy place because she was seen, heard, known there.¹

From the beginning, human beings have been drawn back to places made holy by the presence of holy men or women, prophets or saints, who have had an impact on their lives—even when they have never known or met them, or even lived in the same century. What draws us is not only, or even mainly, the place itself—the mountain or spring, grotto or cave, church or office. It's the person, the relationship, the connection for which we hunger, from which we draw life. The place is hallowed by the story and the vibrance of the one we come to be near, and by the others who have come and continue to come, filled with the same need, sustained by the same relationship.

Places *are* sometimes made holy by the relationships that are known there. You may have heard members of AA or Al Anon speak with a kind of reverence about “these rooms,” the places where meetings are held. Not that those places are somehow special in themselves; many, in fact, are special only in being specially dingy and worn basements of churches or synagogues. But they have become sacred space because of the new life discovered and sustained there by relationships of unconditional love.

¹ This story is retold by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., who heard it from the physician, a colleague and friend. Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal (New York, Riverhead Books, 1996, 2006), 243, *ff.*

“These rooms” are made holy by the real life that is lived there—real pain shared, real healing, strength and hope born of experience and acceptance. “Keep coming back,” everyone says at the end of a meeting, “It works if you work it.” Stay on the path, stay on the way; stay connected, stay in relationship.

Well, there you are. This does sound awfully familiar. “Abide in me as I abide in you.” Stay in the relationship that gives life, brings healing and wholeness, new vision and understanding.

It can happen anywhere, of course. On a desert road to Gaza—never a very hospitable place, not a road that would seem to hold any promise at all of new life.

It can happen on the move. “Abiding” is not settling comfortably in, as a kind of spiritual couch potato. “Rise up, let us be on our way.” That’s what Jesus has said to the disciples in the upper room, immediately before what we heard here this morning, his meditation on himself as the true vine, disciples as the branches.

It can happen between strangers, men of different class, one wealthy with a high position, and one living hand to mouth; of different ethnic origin, Greek and African; men who, as far as we can tell, never even knew each other’s names, never got each other’s contact information so they could stay in touch. Men who shared something essential: a compelling love and desire for relationship with God, lived out in active love for God’s people.

At the beginning of the story, the Ethiopian is unaware of the good news of Jesus. But he is already “on the way,” or on the way to the Way. He has been to Jerusalem to worship. He is probably what is known as a God-fearer, someone who worships the God of Israel but has not become a convert. In the Ethiopian’s case, perhaps because he is a eunuch, considered not whole, not eligible to be a convert.

Nevertheless, there is something that has drawn him to faith in this God. At some expense, he has bought a scroll of the prophet Isaiah; he is reading it as he heads home in his chariot.

Commentators point out a prophecy a few chapters on from the passage the Ethiopian is reading from Isaiah. That prophecy concerns “eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,” and “foreigners who join themselves to the LORD,” to whom the Lord will “give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters . . . ,” who will be accepted in the Lord’s house, “for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” (Isa. 56:4-7)

The suggestion is that this well known promise of a future when all people will be welcomed and acceptable to God, is part of the significance of the Ethiopian’s reading Isaiah. The author of the Book of Acts would have us realize that now, in Jesus, the time of fulfillment has arrived.

The Church in many places continues to struggle with the fullness of God's promise in Isaiah. But on a wilderness road, where no one would expect to encounter any kind of fruitfulness, the promise comes to fruition through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Ethiopian and Philip, the Jew of Greek origin recently made a deacon, meet and form a relationship with each other, in Christ.

The Ethiopian extends hospitality to Philip, welcoming him into his chariot. Philip opens the meaning of the Word to the Ethiopian so that it becomes clear that it is addressed to *him*, and the Word comes alive in his life. He sees, understands, and immediately wants to enter fully into relationship with the God of Israel in Jesus. "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"

Philip could not have convinced the Ethiopian of any of this through any form of argument. It came about through their conversation, in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. "Conversation" being derived from the Latin for "live with, keep company with" (*conversari*). It came about through their being in relationship, with the Spirit of Christ in their midst. And although they never saw or spoke to one another again—Philip having been snatched up by the Spirit and found next in Azotus, farther up the coast; the Ethiopian continuing on home, southward—their relationship continued, continues, will continue. In the text, of course, and also in life: as branches that abide in the vine they are connected with each other, forever.

I am mindful of the power of this abiding, here in this place, on this day. This is a day of comings and goings. As always, we welcome all who are visitors or newcomers. In a few minutes we will formally welcome into this part of the Body of Christ (also known as "this part of the Vine") those who have formally committed themselves to life in this parish by having their baptisms recorded in the parish register. We look forward to being nurtured, pruned and shaped, and bearing fruit together in our mutual abiding as branches of the vine for a long time to come.

After welcoming new members, we will pray farewell with someone who has been an integral part of life in Christ in this parish for almost two years, our seminarian, Valerie. In her time with us, she has been nurtured by many of you, especially by the members of her lay committee. We have watched her grow and mature, bearing fruit in her work with Godly Play, in the healing team and pastoral care, in her preaching. She has helped others to grow and bear fruit, as well. Now she is counting down the days until her graduation and her ordination as a deacon in the Diocese of Southern Virginia.

We will pray our farewells. Then we will gather around the Lord's table—old-comers and newcomers; lifetime members and first time visitors; lay and ordained; seekers, believers and doubters; those who are coming and those who are leaving—all welcome to be fed and sustained, in communion with God in Christ and one another.

This is a place that has been made holy by more than a a hundred years of celebrating and sharing in the Sacrament, of prayer and worship, of interpreting in

community how the Word is alive and acting in our lives and our common life—a place where we abide with one another in the life of the Vine, in times of sorrow and joy.

Some of us have come here from other places where we knew the love of God in community. Some, like Valerie, will move on to new communities where life and relationships in Christ bring forth abundant life and fruit. But always, whether we are coming, or going, or remaining right here for now, it is the life of the true vine, our life in Christ, that gives us life, holds us in life-giving relationship, is our true home. Wherever we are. Always. For eternity.