

Detouring Dead Ends

Genesis 45: 1-11 Matthew 15: 10-28

We get to places in our lives and experiences that seem to bring us to a point where no further movement can occur. We're familiar with dead ends. Some of them were relationships, maybe a spouse, a neighbor, a friend, a school chum, where things just withered and ended. In work lives, some folks stay in dead-end jobs that pay well but are useless positions. Sadly, many teachers and administrators in the school district are happily retiring early because their jobs have become so impossible that they cannot bear to continue – the jobs have become dead-ends.

I've been interviewing students in my class at the prison. I have a bunch who have life sentences. One was charged at age 17 and has been in prison for 20 years; he is now 37. Another man has been in prison for over 30 years and has 10 more years to survive before release; he is 69 now.

The crimes they committed were surely horrible to gain such harsh sentences, but after such long periods of time, neither one poses much of a threat to society. As the one-time 17-year old approaches 40, he is no longer the same individual who was sentenced. He is mature, thoughtful, and completely changed. The old man is in good shape and has no health issues right now. At 69, the old man doesn't pose a significant threat to society, only a significant cost burden to keep incarcerated. They are both in dead-end situations, living in prison blue uniforms, eating prison food, sleeping on prison cots, being counted several times a day, randomly searched, day in and day out, year after year, until their sentence or their life is ended.

My task with my Life Mapping class is to help these guys to recognize that the prison in which they are spending a significant chunk of their lives is defined as much or more by their mind and spirit as by the fences and razor wire. An [excellent TED Talk by Paul Wood](#), a former inmate in New Zealand, makes the case that he didn't change his self-destructive ways until he realized that he was in his own self-made prison *long before* he entered the correctional facility. His talk is aptly entitled: "What's Your Prison?" God's purpose and promise live on in these men, even in prison, and helping them to recognize that different perception of reality is what the class can do.

The dead-ends that we sometimes face in our lives can lead us to a prison of own making, or we can discern the detour that enables us to make forward progress and fulfill the promise that God has for us wherever we find ourselves.

Consider Joseph. This guy ran into a *lot* of dead ends, and I mean literal **dead** ends. You remember when his brothers first plotted to kill him, and then decided to make some money selling him as a slave to passing traders headed to Egypt.

After being sold into slavery, the story could have ended. But he survives the journey and is obtained by Potiphar, a high-ranking palace administrator in the empire of Pharaoh in Egypt.

Joseph seems to have gotten a nice inside job as a slave. That is, until his owner's wife goes cougar for his handsome young body. She gets jilted by Joseph, but he gets arrested on a phony sex charge. It looks bad for our hero, rotting in prison and destined to be rat food. Like a soap opera, we wait breathless at the end of each installment to see if our hero is going survive and continue into the next episode.

Then he helps some fellow prisoners gain their release. They apparently celebrate their freedom for a few years, having forgotten about the guy whose inside knowledge got them sprung. Then their memory gets jolted about our man, Joseph, still languishing in prison all this time. They only remember ol' Joseph when it seemed like his skill at interpreting dreams would gain *them* some benefit. Nice.

Joseph does gain his freedom, plus his dream interpreting ability lands him a top job at Pharaoh's right hand. He's made "czar" of the empire's economy. Knowing the seven fat years will be followed by seven lean years, he uses the empire's resources to buy up all the grain for the next seven years. When the drought, plague, and famine hit the region seven years later, Pharaoh's star Joseph is ready to sell grain for a princely sum to the weak and desperate. Did I just hear the whoosh of a windfall profit? Oh, yeah. For seven long years. Not a big story for ethics or generosity; Joseph exploits famine and hunger for profit. Joseph takes care of his boss, Pharaoh and his empire, and surely himself, too.

During this famine, who does Joseph see in the bread line? His brothers, the same weasels who sold him into slavery decades ago. Amid the famine and desperation, family members from Judea have arrived in Egypt looking for food.

The story spends a lot of time on the way Joseph plays with his brothers and seeks to manipulate them, even keeping one in prison as a hostage of sorts. Almost perversely, Joseph hides his true identity amid the back-and-forth with his brothers.

In today's reading, Joseph comes clean and reveals his true identity. His brothers had thought, of course, that pain-in-the-rump Joseph was as good as dead by now. Think again, boys. Joseph managed several detours when dead-ends seemed his fate.

Neither Joseph nor his kin meet a dead end. Both survive and future generations look back, perhaps echoing Joseph's revision history that God had driven him to Egypt in advance of the famine so that his family would be preserved and the promise of God sustained in them. (On the other hand, over the seven years, when the money was gone, slavery was the only option left; selling oneself into slavery for food, and to the service of Pharaoh. That's where we'll find God's people when the story starts again.)

One of the things we come to realize is that God really doesn't have much use for dead ends. God creates new turns, new chapters, new directions where none had seemed possible before. Somehow God made a way for Joseph from death in a cistern to sale into slavery to imprisonment and near death to freedom, blessing, and new life.

Jesus is able to discern the dead-ends around him and it forms part of his teaching, and, as we'll see, part of his learning, too.

In the reading from Matthew, we have Jesus correcting people's notions about the nature of sin. They had been taught all their lives that sinfulness was a failure to observe the laws of the Torah, including dietary laws. Prepare food incorrectly or eat the incorrect food and you make yourself impure and unclean – sinful – and invite the judgment of God for your failure to obey God's commands. Of course many other things are counted as sinful, but the ritual cleanliness of food serves Jesus' purposes best. He explains that God has created *all* food. Therefore, what a person eats is not the biggest deal, nor is the state of their ritual cleanliness.

Jesus is far more concerned about what comes out of the heart rather than what goes into the mouth. From the heart comes the inspiration for everything evil and corrupt as well as everything good and worthy. Ritual cleanliness and dietary restrictions don't have ultimate importance compared to spiritual strength and the heart's integrity.

While Jesus stressed this teaching to his disciples, his next encounter puts it to the test, only the test is on Jesus. He comes into the border country with Lebanon where the people are mostly Gentiles. He meets a Syro-Phoenician or Canaanite woman whose daughter is possessed by a demon. She reaches out to Jesus and he plainly and deliberately ignores her. The woman doesn't stop crying out to Jesus in appeal.

The disciples tell Jesus to send her away and be done with her. Jesus replies to the Gentile woman: *I was sent only to the lost house of Israel*. In effect, he is saying that his mission is **not** to the Gentiles, only to the Jews. This was also reflected in his mission charge when he sent out the Twelve on their first independent mission: *Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel*. (Matt. 10:5-6) This may seem strange to us because we have seen Jesus reaching out to all without distinction, to the rich and the poor, the righteous and the sinner, the tax collector and the Pharisee. Here Jesus has drawn a line and seems determined to stick with it.

This Gentile woman is no wallflower. Her daughter is demon-possessed and she needs help. Nothing has helped at all. Yet she believes that Jesus will bring her daughter healing. She starts to get in Jesus' face, kneeling in front of him and presumably blocking his path. Jesus tells her, *It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs*. Note: the children are the Jews and the dogs are Gentiles like this woman. Jesus is telling her she is no more than a dog in the eyes of God and it would be contrary to God's will for him to give to her daughter the healing that has been "reserved" for God's people in Israel.

The woman comes right back at him and says, *Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table*. Buzz-zing! Jesus gets stung by the woman's comments. She admits that Gentiles like her are not included in the *covenant* of God with his chosen people. But she insists on her place within the *creation* of God.

She claims God's love, grace, and care even if she stands outside the covenant. She challenges Jesus to deny her that standing before God. Jesus is slam-dunk shut-down shut-up.

Jesus realizes that she is (hate to admit it) right. Not part of the covenant, yet she is part of God's creation. Besides, her witness of faith in Jesus and the power of God to bring new life is quite evident. She has just taught Jesus, taking the dead-end that Jesus had assumed all along, and *she* detoured him onto a thoroughfare so that *Jesus'* mission included **all** of God's people, not simply those who had been chosen in the covenant.

Jesus replies, *'Woman, you have great faith. Your request is granted.'* And *her daughter was healed.* And we never hear about this separation of Jew and Gentile from the grace of God ever again in Matthew. In the Great Commission at the end of Matthew, Jesus' final instructions to the disciples are so very different from his instructions on their first mission: *go and make disciples of all nations.* (Matt. 28: 19)

Jesus chased his own logic right into a dead end that **limits** the grace and compassion of God to the chosen people of the covenant, the Jews, only. It took this determined woman to detour him, *to teach him* about the place of other people having value in the eyes of God.

The kingdom of God doesn't have much use for dead ends. When we believe that a particular road won't take us any further, it is the work of faith to push a little farther, to angle for a detour instead of stopping in our tracks. In that effort, we may find the dead end is **not** as terminal as we had believed, and that there is more for the faithful person to pursue.

Roads in the kingdom of God are going someplace, and they want to take the faithful person to a new destination. So may we not get discouraged when it looks like the road has ended; God has ways to open up apparent dead ends as God seeks to bring you to the next place on your journey toward the kingdom.