

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 27, 2020
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Ezekiel 18: 1-4, 25-32
Psalms 25: 1-8
Philippians 2:1-13
Matthew 21:23-32

Finding Our Way

Last Tuesday, we experienced a near-perfect first day of fall: sunshine, a faint breeze, mild temperatures. With our work schedules still disrupted by the pandemic, Wade and I were able to take some time and get outdoors. So we headed down to Mason Neck State Park. About halfway around the Bay View Trail, Wade suddenly uttered a curse (sorry, honey!) and said, “That was stupid. I didn’t bring the trail map or my GPS.” I assured him we simply needed to keep walking—the trail is a crooked loop and is blazed to boot—and indeed we got back to our starting point with no trouble at all.

But that little episode got me thinking about the tools and methods we use to find our way, and how much they’ve changed over the years of my lifetime. Remember roadmaps and all the jokes about how hard they were to refold? Remember road atlases, those big books with highway maps of all the US states? Remember learning to use a compass and tell direction? These days, we just tell our car or our phone where we want to go, and a disembodied voice guides us through the turns. If we need a compass, there’s an app on our phones for that, too. And yet I still get lost every time I try to do an errand in Springfield....

All of the devices and methods that we use to literally find our way through the physical world also come up in metaphorical terms. Think about it: we discuss whether or not someone has a strong moral compass. We talk about our spiritual journeys, our search for the right path, our roadmaps for life. We say we are lost, wandering in the wilderness, desperately seeking signposts to get ourselves back on track. We echo the Psalmist in today’s reading, who cries out, “Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth, and teach me.”

Are you with me so far? We’ve all had these experiences, right?

Here’s good news, from our Old Testament reading: the prophet Ezekiel tells us that God will give us chance upon chance to “turn away from...wickedness and do what is lawful and right,” to REPENT (literally to change direction, to take another road), to save our lives. God loves us enough to want to us do the right thing and to help us find the right way. God responds to the pleas of the Psalmist and to our own. “For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, says the Lord God. Turn, then, and live.”

And that brings me to our reading from Matthew’s Gospel, two snippets of Jesus’ ministry that initially may seem unconnected. In the first passage, he interacts with the chief priests and the elders of the people; he responds to their question with one of his own. As they challenge him about his authority, he in turn challenges them to explain their rejection of John the Baptist.

Abruptly, with no transition, Jesus launches into a parable. We have to wait until the end of the passage to even be certain that this is still part of the same episode, that he's talking to the same group of Jewish leaders. And that's when we find the connecting theme: unlike the crowd that saw John as a prophet, unlike tax collectors and prostitutes who turned to follow John in "the way of righteousness," the priests and elders have refused to believe. Rejecting John's offer of help with repentance, they stubbornly stick to their own false path.

If you'll bear with me, I'm now going to strike out in a somewhat "meta" direction. Because, in posing his challenging question and in telling a parable about a son who changes his mind and follows the will of his father, Jesus is not just confronting the priests and elders about their behavior. He is not only accusing them of doing the wrong thing, making the wrong choice. He is yet again giving them an opportunity to repent and follow. We see God, in the person of Jesus, doing exactly what Ezekiel prophesied: giving everyone chance after chance to be saved, to turn and participate in their own salvation.

So that's the good news: we, too, will get chance upon chance to turn, to take the better way, to do God's will rather than stubbornly stick to the paths that lead us away from eternal life. Good news, indeed. But, so what?

In my "real" life as a manager and editor of national intelligence, we talk about the "what" and the "so what" of intelligence analysis. What are the implications of a piece of analysis? Is it "actionable?" What do we do with the information? And I think those are fair questions for us regarding the good news that we get from these Scripture passages.

So what do we do with this good news? We all know that we're called to share it with others, to spread it along our path, and today's reading from Matthew gives us two examples, directly from Jesus, for ways of doing that: telling stories and asking challenging questions. I suspect that most of you, like me, are far more comfortable with the idea of telling stories: Bible stories, parables, our own accounts of faith and doubt, belief and struggle.

So let's take the other path at this fork in the road; let's talk about difficult questions, queries designed to make people think deeply about what they believe, why they believe it, and what they do in response to their belief. I'm not suggesting that we all go out and demand that our neighbors explain themselves. As Paul says in today's passage from Philippians, we should imitate Jesus in his humility; it's striking to me that in our story from Matthew, Jesus asks the priests and elders about their reaction to John, not to himself. On the other hand, we shouldn't fear deep questions in serious conversations, especially if we sense that such questions might help another to find signposts on the search for the right path. It's possible for each of us to ask such questions in a spirit of love and support.

Still feeling uneasy? Yeah, so am I. So maybe we should ensure that we can really walk the walk by starting with ourselves, as individuals and as a parish community. After all, "Being part of a community means being ready to argue with it, to criticize it, to ask it to live up to its best self," says Nancy Fuchs Kreimer.¹ And because our actions matter more than our words—a key lesson we probably all learned years ago from today's parable—perhaps a good trailhead is to ask questions about the alignment between what we say and what we do.

¹ Nancy Fuchs Kreimer, "Trouble Praying," in *My Neighbor's Faith*, ed. Peace, Rose, and Mobley, Orbis Books, New York, 2012.

Wade reminded us in his sermon last Sunday that God's love is infinite; that seeing someone get a big slice of God's love pie doesn't do anything to reduce the amount of love left for us. Do we live that thought? Do we share freely or fear not having enough? If we take a hard look at our social media posts, are we promoting harmony or division? We pray every week—many of us every day—for help in loving our neighbor as ourselves. Do we live that prayer? Do we grant others the dignity and respect that we expect for ourselves? We have banners on our front porch that proclaim our inclusiveness, our welcome to all. Do we live that radical hospitality when someone unlike us comes to the door? I'm sure you can think of many similar questions that we could ask ourselves, particularly in these fraught times of pandemic, political tension, and our own preparations to welcome a new Priest in Charge.

Thank you for sticking with me on a sermon that seems to have followed a winding path, from a literal walk in the woods to a few faltering steps into the wilderness of our hearts and souls. Remember that God walks with us always, to help us find our way. Amen.