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“The Road Less Travelled”

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12–23

I’m remembering the poem “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost.

It’s about a traveler walking through the woods, coming to a fork in the path. He considers one and then the other. One seems to be more traveled than the other. He ponders his decision: which path to take?

And in the concluding lines, the poet reflects on decisions made:

He writes,

“I shall be telling this with a sigh
somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The story of the Christian faith, the Christian journey, begins when a young man named Jesus one day leaves home, sets out on an adventure, and takes “the road less traveled.”

It is such an inconspicuous detail in the Bible record that you can almost miss it. Matthew says simply “Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. “ He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea.”

Think of the feeling, the questions, the fears and doubts that must lie behind that simple statement. *“He withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the sea.”*

He was around thirty years old, a carpenter, responsible for the care of his mother and his younger brothers and sisters, and announces one day that he’s leaving, leaving the business, leaving the security of a regular income, leaving the care of his family.

He left Nazareth and made his home in
Capernaum by the sea.”

It’s just a small detail in the narrative, but it expresses
familiar human feelings and passion.

Profound loss. And awesome hope.

William Willimon, for years chaplain at Duke University, recalls a
parents’ weekend when the visiting preacher in the chapel had just
read about Jesus calling the disciples, and then looked out at the
congregation of undergraduates and parents, and observed a sad
truth, “Jesus broke the hearts of many a first-century family.”

Willimon recalls that in his more than twenty years as Duke’s
chaplain he had maybe twenty angry telephone calls from parents.
“But never did they say, ‘Help. I sent my child to the university
and he got addicted to drugs or alcohol,’
or ‘Help. I sent my child to college and she became
sexually promiscuous.’

No, the calls I got were, ‘Help. I sent my child to
Duke and she became a religious fanatic.’

Religious fanatic defined as ‘she’s going on a
two-year mission to Haiti with the Catholics’”
(*Thank God It’s Friday*, p. 30).

And I can relate to that. At age 24 I told my parents I was going to
be pastor in a small church in eastern Kentucky. In the heart of
Appalachia. Nearest town, Hazard, KY, 25 miles away and over 6
mountains. “Why?” My mother asked. “Why lose yourself in the
mountains of eastern Kentucky?” Why? Because the need is much
greater there. And I feel God calling me.

And six years later Pat and I were on to Louisville, KY. A new
church ...the congregation nine years old ... I was called to be their
second pastor. Their special calling was to be an integrated
congregation. Of their 120 members, around 90 were African-
American – 30 were white.

Civil Rights storms were brewing and this congregation/and
that Presbytery envisioned a better way ... a more faithful
church inclusive ... black and white together...a place of
harmony.

Peace was the name they chose for their church. And
my mother said, “Bob, there are congregations seeking

pastors right here in Pennsylvania. Wouldn't it be better to work with your own kind?"

For Jesus, it all began when something stirred in his heart, and he began an unlikely adventure.

And it continues as the same thing soon happens again. Walking along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus sees two brothers, Peter and Andrew. "Follow me," he says, "and they left their nets and followed him."

And then two more, James and John, in the boat with their father: "Follow me," and immediately they followed.

Probably most come to be who we are through a long process of discernment, taking courses, earning degrees, weighing options, ... probably over several years. Maybe we're still doing it, trying to decide what we will do with the rest of our lives.

For most it was a little more complicated and complex and ambiguous than "'Follow me' and they left their nets and followed."

But at some point we had to decide to get up from what we were doing and move.

What the Bible is talking about in these small vignettes is actually FAITH. FAITH is hearing the voice, the voice of God, the call of Jesus, and stepping out onto the road and following.

FAITH is there from the very beginning, when an elderly couple, Abraham and Sarah, comfortable, wealthy, settled, hear a voice/feel a nudge. "Go from your country," the voice says.

"Leave your family, your native land, your comfort and security."

"And Abraham and Sarah went." That, the Bible says, is what faith is. Centuries later, St. Paul is still talking about Abraham and Sarah as people of FAITH, prime examples of what faith is. What FAITH looks like. How faith behaves.

It's a matter of getting up from where you are ... and going. Following.

But we are rational people, and we define religious faith intellectually, as a list of ideas we believe to be true.

We have been brought-up with a definition of faith as assent and adherence to a set of beliefs.

...And since faith is assent and adherence to a set of beliefs, we can draw a line between those who are in and those who are not,

those who believe and those who do not,
those who can and those who can't.

And since faith is adherence to a list of beliefs, we can struggle with those beliefs and set ourselves to the challenge of finally working our way to a position of intellectual agreement.

(Or to simply kind of hold our nose/or squint our eyes with those beliefs that we don't understand/or accept)

Or we can tell ourselves that we don't belong in church because we can't affirm all those beliefs.

And we can have a fine old time arguing and fighting one another about whose list of beliefs is the real and authentic one and which is watered down, or down-right wrong ...heretical. We've made a game of it for over 2000 years, and we are still at it. And all too often, the game becomes deadly.

But we need to remember that it all begins **not** with a list of beliefs to adhere to, **nor** with a creed to recite, but with a voice saying, "Follow me." It begins not with theological examination but with a summons: "Follow me." And an obedient walk down a lesser known path.

It would be interesting to know more about what was going on with Peter and Andrew, James and John.

I wonder if they had known Jesus earlier. I wonder if they had heard him speak, perhaps had searching, in-depth conversations with him about the meaning of life.

I wonder what was going on in their personal lives. Were they restless, frustrated, unhappy with the status quo?

I wonder ... Did James and John feel oppressed and constrained by their father Zebedee's demands; his rigid, unbending sense that his was the only way to cast a net, to row a boat, to clean a fish?

We don't know any of that. Maybe the decision to follow came after a lot of struggling and hoping and doubting. That's the way it is for many of us. We don't know. All we **do know** is that for them faith begins when they hear a voice, a summons, and decide to get up and follow along a less traveled way.

Notice that the initiative is with Jesus, not with them. Jesus comes to them. Comes to them where they are ... and they are working.

Jesus' disciples do not appear to be God-consumed religious seekers. Not religious fanatics. When Jesus found them, not one of them was at prayer in the synagogue.

They were not searching for God: rather they were at their nets or doing their tax collecting business.

Sometimes we think religious faith is our search for God, for meaning, for truth to live by. And in a way, that is true. That's a noble and admirable quest.

But an even more profound reality is that the initiative in this search is God's, not ours.

God comes to us.

God fills the need, the hunger and thirst for truth and authenticity and meaning in us.

Some search for God, as if the Holy One was a set of misplaced car keys. The shocking truth is that it is **we** who have misplaced ourselves. The journey of faith is not so much to 'find God' as it is a struggle to follow a God who has already found us ... For God has created us.

I believe God calls us most powerfully/most persuasively in the midst of our lives. Not when we are being religious, saying our prayers, singing our hymns, or listening to sermons even,
but God meets us while we are at our nets, working, living, loving, parenting, making decisions about what causes to support, whom to vote for, how to divvy-up our resources.

I believe God comes to us and calls us in those matters about which we are most passionate, our deepest and dearest loves, our strongest concerns and commitments, our most precious hopes and dreams.

God comes, Christ calls us to follow, in the events and relationships and encounters and challenges of our daily lives.

And Jesus comes ... not just to clergy, by the way. That is one of the tragic misunderstandings: the notion that God calls people to professional ministry and everyone else is on their own to make vocational decisions, decisions about how to live and whom to follow.

Certainly you have noticed that there are no priests, no ministers, no rabbis among the first disciples. There are no clergy or laity, no ruling elders or teaching elders ... just men and women called to be disciples, to get up and follow.

God comes to each of us in the voice of Christ. Some respond by leaving home and going to seminary.

Some leave home and go to trade school, or law school or medical school or business school.

Some stay home and continue doing what they are doing, going to work, taking care of business, diapering the babies, cooking the meals,
arguing the case, teaching the class, closing the deal.

But all of us are called to a new place, a new life shaped by him, to new values informed by him,
to new justice and hope and love—
lived in the world in Jesus' name and
for his sake.

John Newton got it right. An eighteenth-century British sea captain transporting slaves, Newton was relentlessly challenged by God working through his conscience, became a Christian, then an Anglican priest.

Following a radical attitude adjustment, John Newton took a way less travelled and worked tirelessly to abolish slavery in

Great Britain. He wrote what has become probably the most popular, most beloved hymn in the English language:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
was blind, but now I see.

Once lost—now found. That’s the way it is with God and with us:
With God and Abraham and Sarah. With Jesus, and Simon Peter,
Andrew, James, and John. With Jesus and you and me.

Oh yes ... with Jesus and Head of Christiana Presbyterian church.
You have chosen the road less traveled. You don’t have to have it
all worked out intellectually or emotionally. You don’t have to have
pat answers to all of life’s big and troublesome questions. Even
questions friends and neighbors ask – even family, perhaps.

You may still be scratching your head and wondering what has
happened to us – to our church over these past two years?

Could it be that we have responded to Jesus’ winsome
call? That we’re following Jesus, on the road less
travelled?

As he walked by the sea, Jesus saw two brothers, Simon Peter and
Andrew, casting a net into the sea. “Follow me,” he said, “and I will
make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and
followed him.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I —
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.
(*“The Road Not Taken”* by Robert Frost)

Enough said. So let the journey continue.