

Road Trip—a Journey with Jesus

“*FORK IN THE ROAD*”

Scripture lesson: Luke 12:49-53

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A couple of years ago we took a trip to San Francisco with friends. After a few days in the city we rented a car to drive north into the Napa valley, Sonoma and the coast. Our first night was in Napa. The next morning we got out our maps and plotted our course north. As we headed out of town, we kept an eye out for the highway number. Maybe it is a California thing, but signs were small and hard to spot.

We came to a fork in the road and weren't sure which direction to go, so we stayed right. The road led us through neighborhoods and then we began to climb. The higher we got, the narrower the road. The scenery was beautiful, but it didn't feel like a highway. We climbed higher and higher until finally the road became a dirt road. By then it was obvious we had taken the wrong turn. We were on the wrong road. We turned around, headed back down the mountain to that fork in the road, but this time, went the other way. And it got us there.

If I had paid more attention, I might have got it right the first time. But the point is we all come to those forks in the road where we have to decide. It is the situation Robert Frost captured in his poem:

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;

There are those junctures in life when we have to choose because we can't travel both roads and be one traveler.

That was the situation behind the words of Jesus in the Gospel this morning. "Whoever comes to me and does not hate his mother and father, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes even life itself, cannot be my disciple." That's kind of harsh. It is another one of those sayings of Jesus that we would rather he had not said. This morning we have a membership class, imagine if I said to them, "you are all going to have to hate your mother and father, disown your family!" That would thin out the crowd in a hurry.

But notice the verse that introduces these words, "now large crowds were traveling with him, and he turned and said to them..." Jesus attracted large, enthusiastic crowds throughout his ministry, particularly in Galilee. Now these crowds are following him; nothing succeeds like success. Who doesn't want to jump on a bandwagon, go along for the ride, join the excitement?

Of course, it is easy to be a part of a crowd. You are anonymous. People do things in a crowd they would never do on their own; to join a crowd there is no requirements, really. No one asks much of you. It feels good, affirming of one's own identity and worth, to be a part of a crowd. It makes you feel like you are a part of something. Large crowds were following him.

In an open piece in the New York Times recently, Pastor Jeffrey McDonald writes that the chief stress among pastors has to do with the expectations of a consumer driven religion. "The pastoral vocation is to help people grow spiritually, resist their lowest impulses and adopt higher, more compassionate ways. But churchgoers increasingly want pastors to soothe and entertain them." The Christian Century notes that MacDonald knows the pressure. The advisory committee in his congregation told him to keep his sermons to ten minutes, tell funny stories, and help people feel good about themselves." The implicit warning, "give us what we want or we will go elsewhere." And people do. People shop for churches now, like they would shop for a car. That's a religion that plays to the crowds.

Large crowds were following Jesus. But it isn't as if he is about to soothe them, or entertain them. Remember where this journey is taking them. Jerusalem. Arrest. Trial. Torture. Death on a cross. The way to salvation, healing and redemption will not be an easy one.

And so, before this parade goes any further, this crowd gathers any more steam, there needs to be a gut check. They were at a fork in the road. Two roads diverged, and you could not travel them both.

These seemingly harsh words of Jesus come at crunch time. The chips were down. The time was rapidly approaching when there would be no middle ground. The jubilant, receptive crowds of Galilee would give way the mobs in Jerusalem, shouting, "Crucify him!" From this point on it would be risky to follow Jesus. You would not be able to hide out in the crowd. Remain anonymous. From this point on, you are in or you are out. You are with me or against me. There is no middle ground.

And that is the problem. We live in a time and place where we like to have our cake and eat it too. The word commitment scares us a bit. We like to keep our options open. When we come to a fork in the road, we are sorry not to be able to take both, so we take neither.

Richard Niebhuur said that the danger for many in our culture is a kind of polytheism. *Theos* means god, *poly* means many. A polytheist has many gods. There is no one center of value or power. Such a person has many interests and values but no one compelling center to life. As a result, the polytheist makes only temporary commitments or no commitments at all. They are left to squeeze whatever meaning or purpose they can form in the momentary, the passing and transient.

We see this in the classic American novel, *On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac. Kerouac was the creator of what came to be called the "beat generation" that began in the 50's and 60's.

In the novel, Sal is a young writer who, along with his friend Dean, sets out road-racing around America in search of fulfillment. These are symbols of a desire for people to find freedom, to be liberated from the confines of society, from commitment to any form of higher belief. In their search for fulfillment, they believed that "the only thing to do was to go," falling into whatever experience happened their way; finding pleasure in sex, drugs, jazz, living for the moment. Being on the road was living a life free of commitments; open to anything and everything. Refusing to choose or commit to anything except being on the road.

The problem with this approach is that rather than finding ourselves when we free-float through life, living from one experience to another, we can actually lose ourselves. Daniel Yankolovich, "You do not consist of an aggregate of needs, and your inner growth is not a matter of fulfilling all your potential. By concentrating day and night on your feelings, potentials, needs, wants, desires, . . . you do not become freer, more spontaneous, a more creative self. You become narrower, more self-centered, more insulated. You do not grow, you shrink."

We mature, grow, and become strong in relationship to the commitments we make – commitments to others. It is what we decide to commit ourselves to that determines who and what we become. We can only be as big as our commitments are large. If our only commitment is to ourselves, we will live small lives.

Large crowds were traveling with Jesus. When he turned and said to them, "If you come with me and don't hate your father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters..., you cannot be my disciple." To be on the road with Jesus means that we must choose, commit.

Jesus is not laying out some principle or requirement that we must hate our mother and fathers to follow him. He is using the language of our most basic relationships, our deepest commitment to family, to make clear what discipleship means. What our first love must be. "If you are going to follow me, you have to step out of the crowd."

At one point or another, for all of us, we come to a fork in the road where we must make a decision which road we will take. We have to choose who or what we will follow, where our commitment lies. We have to decide what comes first in our lives. We have to come to a decision about Jesus. Are we on the road with him, or, are we just on the road?