

This Do; But Why?

From the series: Journeying With Jesus on the Road Less Traveled

Text: Luke 22:19, 1 Corinthians 11:24

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Once again the Lenten season. Once again "Journeying with Jesus on the Road Less Traveled." That is the Lenten theme for 2002. We are here again, and it all seems so familiar, and yet, it is all new and fresh, which is the amazing thing about the Gospel story. With each returning Lenten season – to focus once again on Jesus, on his life, on his fate, on that which emerged in the wake of his life and death and the experience of his presence living with them – all of that never seems to grow old or ordinary. And so, once again, we will journey with Jesus on the road less traveled. The road less traveled is a phrase which, to a contemporary audience, probably calls to mind the book by M. Scott Peck by that title, *The Road Less Traveled*, of which I guess there have been some six million published, a book that was on the bestseller list of *The New York Times Review of Books* longer than any that I know. I paged through it quickly; I didn't see any reference in Scott Peck's book to the origin of that phrase, but really it is a poem by Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken," and if things work out according to schedule, we'll conclude this Lenten journey to the threshold of Holy Week with that poem rendered beautifully as an anthem. But, in the meantime, we want to journey with Jesus on the road less traveled.

The road less traveled would indicate that there's a fork in the road and, contrary to that profound, contemporary philosopher Yogi Berra, who said, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it," a fork in the road demands of us a choice. We cannot take both arms of the fork. Sometime along the way, we meet that fork in the road and we have to decide where we will travel and how we will travel.

Jesus met such a fork in the road at some point. We want to be examining that in these weeks. Last week we did hear the question that John the Baptist raised to Jesus. He sent his disciples to Jesus to say, "Are you the one, or do we look for another?" because John had heard rumors about a marvelous ministry in which there was joy and grace in Galilee, and it wasn't exactly the blueprint that John had envisioned for Jesus for whom he had been a mentor and a guide. But Jesus, obviously in the struggle to determine his own call and identity, when faced with that fork in the road to follow John and his preaching of righteousness and the

apocalyptic nearness of the end, took a road less traveled. He went another way and, in going another way, he found himself on the way to the cross.

We have been to the table this morning. The table is set with bread and cup, the bread is broken and the cup is poured out. It doesn't seem, in the sanitized version in which we experience it as a congregation in 2002, to represent what, as a matter of fact, it does. It was John Dominic Crossan here one Lord's Day, I think on the first Sunday of Lent, who reminded us that when you have bread and cup separated, speaking for body and blood separated, you have a sign of death and a violent death. And so, when we come to the table of our Lord, we are confronted with the reality of his violent death, which was a consequence of the journey on the road less traveled.

Jesus made his way and the end of it was crucifixion because of that for which he spoke and which he embodied, which was nothing less than the love of God in the midst of our human darkness. As we journey with Jesus during these Lenten Sundays, we will be journeying on the way we have gone several times before. It is not new for this congregation, and I really don't have much that is new, except in nuance. But I was reminded of the way that we have come together over the last decade or decade and a half. My own experience, for better or for worse, eventually proves to be your experience and, as I have been wrestling in earlier years with Jesus, I came to see Jesus less as some God figure and more as a human being who was the embodiment of God. I came to see Jesus in all of his humanity. As the liturgy said a moment ago, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh.

It was April 15 of 1984 that I preached the sermon, "Jesus, You Are Really Somebody," and that was a bit of a watershed for me, because it was as though, in dismantling some of the Christological, creedal formulations of the second and third and fourth and fifth century Church as the Jesus movement became the Christian Church and the established Church of the Roman Empire, I began to see through that Christological, creedal formulation and began to feel the flesh of Jesus. Contrary to what might appear to be happening, that is, that I was pulling Jesus down to my own size, rather, Jesus became for me a man magnificent in what he was and how he was. My estimate of Jesus, my admiration for Jesus, my amazement before Jesus grew in proportion to my seeing him as my brother. Seeing him that way, I began to see him in the way that he was and the way that he walked and the life that he lived. I began to see him in a light that I had never appreciated when, for me before, he had been a divine intruder, a God-figure coming in to effect a salvation for the world. I began to see him in a totally different light and a phrase began to be repeated here, particularly during the Lenten season, "Jesus died the way he died because he lived the way he lived."

I remember it was in 1993, Palm Sunday, when I made the rather bold declaration in the title of the message - "Jesus Did Not Die For Our Sins; Jesus Died Because of Our Sins." It was the darkness of the world that rose up and said

"No" to Jesus, which was, in effect, saying "No" to God. That is the light that began to dawn for me in the life of Jesus, what he embodied, and consequently, what he met in his violent death.

And so, here we are again ready to journey with Jesus on this road less traveled, and we have been to the table this morning. Actually, the message should precede the table, for the Word should illumine the act to follow. But then, how do we get the kids out of here on time? So, we go against good liturgical practice; we do the act and now I'm going to say, "Why?"

Jesus and the institution as Paul passed it along, as Luke passed it along, says "Do this. This do." And I ask, "Why?"

Well, obviously, first of all, and it is in the text itself, "Do this in remembrance of me." For we are historical figures, rooted in history, and unless we continue by some means to call to mind, we forget and we lose. And so, Jesus, in good Jewish fashion, or the followers of Jesus in very natural Jewish fashion, fashioned a ritual, a sacrament, for they had been remembering for 2000 years. The last supper, whether it was technically a Passover meal or not, we can't really be sure, but it was in the manner of the Passover meal, and the Passover meal was an annual celebration of their being set free from Egypt under Moses. It was the Passover supper on the night of their deliverance that they celebrated, and in their years of faithfulness, they celebrated every year and the Jewish community to this day still keeps Passover, remembering that they were slaves in Egypt and they were delivered by the mighty hand of God. In the beautiful statement of Moses in the Book of Exodus, in the words of God, "See how I have brought you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself."

Year by year by year by year, thousands of years now, the Jewish community has remembered and they have maintained their sense of identity. And Jesus and the community around Jesus, the immediate disciples, obviously fashioned a sacramental celebration by which the community would continue to remember, would continue to remember Jesus, to remember, to call to mind, to come back again and again to this founding person, this founding story, to remember Jesus. Every great religion has something that it remembers, that marks it, and there are others who have been luminous with revelatory grace in the history of humankind. But for us, it's Jesus. Jesus is our window into the heart of God and so, just as he, a Jew, was remembering the deliverance of Moses, so the Church for 2000 years has been remembering who it is, who is its center, and what it is called to be, because in that early movement and down to this present day, we believe that something, something came to expression in Jesus, and it is that which came to expression in Jesus to which we are called again and again in order that it might continue to come into expression, in order that the God embodied in Jesus and the manifestation of that grace and power that was there in that life, in order that that same manifestation may continue to be experienced in the ongoing course of history.

It is not as though we worship Jesus. It is not as though we seek to emulate the journey of Jesus. It is that in the journey of Jesus we see that that was it! God was there! This one, this one, with a human face was reflective of the depths of God. That is our story, you see. That's what has made us what we are, and so Jesus said, "Do this."

Why?

In order always to remember, not simply to hark back to that past, although in harking back to that past, we are reminded of that past in order to be reminded what came to expression. Do you follow me?

Sometimes I think that I am so simple and so clear, and then somebody goes out afterwards and they make a comment, and I say, "Oh, my goodness. I must have been so dull." Or, maybe they were, who knows?

You see, the tendency is always, the tendency has been, to make Jesus a cult figure and the tendency rather early on was to turn that whole event into a salvation cult as though somehow or other God was able now to forgive the world because Jesus died for the sin of the world and, frankly, I think that is to evade and to avoid that to which Jesus would call us, that which came to expression in Jesus. What came to expression in Jesus is what needs to come to expression universally in order that this world may be transformed. Jesus said, "Do this. Do this to remember. Don't remember in order that somehow or other I might mean something other than I am. Do this to remember me in order that you may be what I am. Do this in order that the dynamic that is set afoot here may become the dominant mood and dynamic of the world." It's the only hope of the world. They weren't kidding when they made Jesus the light of the world, the hope of the world, the savior of the world. He said, "Do this."

Why?

To remember, and maybe I could add, to stand in solidarity with, not only see it and admire it, but to stand in solidarity with it.

As we read in the first letter of Peter, he has given you an example that you follow in his steps, to remember the teachings of Jesus, to remember what he embodied, and then to say "Yes, yes, yes. Somehow, by God, yes," failing often.

Simon Peter is set before us this morning, denying often, betraying often, yet never able finally to give up that struggle to be in solidarity with Jesus, to be in the uniqueness of our own person, in the uniqueness of our own historical moment, to be what Jesus was in his embodying God, the God who is love, the God who calls for justice, for compassion.

Ah, do this, because every time to feed on Jesus, to say it in that way, is to gain that inward strength once again to be in solidarity.

And then just this, and I don't even know how to say this. To remember, to be in solidarity with, and to experience in the depths of our being the mystery that is God. I grew up in the Reformed faith with a liturgy that comes out of the 17th century which was in the wake, of course, of the 16th century Reformation and the break from the Catholic Church, and that liturgy was didactic. It was a theological statement. Every i dotted, every t crossed. It was a statement of justification, in a sense, of the break from the Roman Church. It was a statement that appealed to the mind, it was an intellectual and a rational description of the understanding of the doctrine of the atonement which was the center of the table or the bread and the cup. That is what marked that post-Reformation community. Intellectual definition, rational explanation.

I have envied those of you who have been raised in the Roman Catholic tradition or high Episcopal or high Lutheran, Anglican, because you always knew there was something more operative than that which could be stated in a proposition, in a creedal clause. Some mystical dimension, some encounter within the depths below a rational mind, the subconscious or the unconscious, some encounter, some experience of God which cannot be defined. Now and again it happens in sacramental action. That's what ritual is about, calling us again and again to a certain practice and, lo and behold, now and again, there is a light that goes on, there is a movement of grace, there is the brush of an angel wing, and that, hopefully, also is at least an occasional experience when we do this, remembering, being in solidarity with, but being open to that dimension of the Spirit that is not at our disposal, but now and again graces us if we have at least some thin, mystical thread within the fabric of our being.

Nancy and I had a lovely evening with three Revs. Van Hoeven and their wives, our dear Gordon and Dorothy, and then his cousin Doc and Shirley, who are members here, and then his brother Jim and Mary, and Jim has been a long-time, close friend of mine and conversation partner. We had an evening in which we partied very well and laughed a lot. We laughed until we cried, and we told stories. We remembered stories. Gordon told stories on me way back into the sixties, and it was a delightful evening. Somewhere in the midst of it, I don't know how it came up, but Jim, who is a good theologian and a good thinker, said to me, "You know, recently Mary and I were in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, that cavernous space, that holy space, and the smell of incense and the mighty choir and the great organ, and I was moved, and I said to Mary, 'The Jesus Seminar doesn't build cathedrals.'" It was a deep, profound insight you see, because, just as I grew up with the liturgy of the Lord's Supper, which was didactic, rational, explaining everything, just so, in our search for the historical Jesus – whether it be Dom Crossan or Marcus Borg or Amy-Jill Levine or Paula Fredriksen, or whomever – sorting through all this stuff, trying to get down to the real core of it, it's not enough.

Finally it is that kind of total commitment in the presence of a mystery that transcends us. And when we come to this table, when we engage in this

community, when we pray and we sing, now and again, here and there, something happens and we keep doing this, not because grace or Spirit or glory are at our disposal, but we keep exposing ourselves in the midst of the mystery, longing to be touched.

Jesus said, "Do this," and as we do it, we remember and we are to go in solidarity with him and the way he went, on the road less traveled, and at the end of it all, the road we take makes all the difference.