

The Way of Jesus: The Road Not Taken

Mark 8:31-9:1

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During Lent, 2002, I preached a sermon series entitled "Journeying With Jesus on the Road Less Traveled." As is the case in this meditation I take the image of the road from Robert Frost's arresting poem, "The Road Not Taken." In the 2002 series I was painting the portrait of Jesus as he made his way from Galilee, through Samaria, finally to arrive at Jerusalem, the entry into Jerusalem that we celebrate next Sunday, Palm Sunday.

As I went back to the poem again I find I probably missed the poet's meaning. He opens with :

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And, sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler,...

Contrary to the advice of Yogi Berra, when one comes to a fork in the road one cannot take it! One must choose.

If you look a second time at the poem, the poet is playing with us. In stanzas two and three he tells us the paths are equally fair, and neither trodden by passers by. Finally, in the final verse, 4, he writes,

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I..
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

But by his own description neither road was less traveled. Perhaps he is foreseeing a time when he will seek to explain his life, maybe rationalize a bit and suggest he took a road less traveled, thus explaining his life's course.

But, however one interprets the poem, the poem is not the point except to say that in 2002 I was describing Jesus' way and thus I think I was legitimate in describing it as a "road less traveled." But this evening my focus is different and so I use the title of the poem – "The Road Not Taken" because in this meditation it is my claim that the way of Jesus is the way not taken – not taken by the church that bears his name.

That is a serious charge but I believe it is tragically true. This 2000 year old institution that looks to Jesus as its Lord and Savior has failed to follow in his way.

The evening Gospel – Mark 8:31 – 9:1 is the first of three predictions of Jesus' imminent passion and resurrection. The Gospels were written decades after Jesus' life, death and resurrection. I'm quite sure Jesus did not sit his disciples down and inform them as Mark puts it,

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. (Mark 8:31)

Nonetheless, that Jesus was clear-eyed and fully aware of the road he was traveling and the inevitable consequences cannot be doubted. He lived with intentionality from his baptism. The Gospel of John has its own way of telling Jesus' story but the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, all move from Jesus' baptism by John with the affirmation from heaven, the temptations, to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. The intention is obvious – to indicate that Jesus had a sense of calling, wrestled with how to execute that calling (the Temptation narrative) and inaugurated his ministry of grace and healing in what has been called the Galilean Springtime.

The opening chapters of Mark document that healing ministry. Then we come to the transition in the narrative – our lesson this evening. It is preceded by Jesus' question to the disciples who had witnessed his miraculous ministry of healing, feeding the thousands – “Who do people say that I am?” They respond, “Some say John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets.” Then the crunch question:

But who do you say that I am?

On behalf of the disciples, Peter responds,

You are the Messiah.

This is a very familiar scene but more often we take Matthew's account (Matthew 16:13-20) which has Jesus commending Peter – in fact, giving him the nickname *Petros* (Peter), meaning Rock. Mark's account is briefer and, rather than affirming Peter, Jesus moves immediately to “sternly warn them not to tell anyone about him.”

Then follows our lesson, the key verse, 31, pointing to the way of suffering, rejection and death ahead. Peter, once again the spokesperson for the disciples, “rebukes” Jesus – a strong word used by Mark. Peter doesn't want to hear about the darkness ahead. Matthew quotes him, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never

happen to you!” Now it is Peter’s turn to be rebuked by Jesus: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

What is going on here? We must remind ourselves that each Gospel writer was dealing with concrete historical happenings – the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. But each writer was also creating the story, framing the meaning and significance of Jesus. Mark has given a picture of Jesus’ ministry and now is about to create a new section of the Gospel – the journey to Jerusalem which culminated in Jesus’ entry to the city that is celebrated on Palm Sunday, which inaugurates what the church calls Holy Week.

A study of Mark’s gospel convinces me that Mark is telling the story of Jesus, in which he reveals the failure of the disciples to understand what Jesus was really all about. In a word, I would contend, according to Mark, the disciples ***didn’t get it!***

As I claim above, the respective Gospel writers had their own peculiar slant on the Jesus event. For Mark a prominent theme was the blindness of the disciples and Jesus’ continual attempt to prepare them for his passion. It is no accident that his new section of Mark’s story is bracketed by two healings of blind persons. Jesus gives sight to a blind man at Bethsaida immediately prior to the paragraph in which Jesus asks the disciples who people are saying he is (8:22-26). This section concludes at chapter 10, verse 52, and verses 46-52 recount the giving of sight to Bartimaeus. Sandwiched between the two instances of giving sight to the blind persons is the middle section of Mark which contains the three passion predictions. And in all three cases the disciples didn’t get it.

Mark makes this clear by the surrounding actions of the disciples. Following Jesus’ first person prediction, as we have seen, Peter said, “No way!” Again at chapter 9, verse 30f, Jesus tells them of his forthcoming death. Mark writes,

But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

Jesus asks them what they were arguing about on the way. But they were silent – the silence of shame – for Mark writes, “But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.” This called forth from Jesus the words, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” He then proceeded to place a child before them, saying that to welcome a child in Jesus’ name welcomes him.

The third passion prediction is found at Mark 10:32-34. Immediately following Jesus’ words, Mark has James and John coming to Jesus asking that he do whatever they say, to which Jesus responds, “What is it you want me to do for you?”

Their request? “Grant us to sit, one on your right hand and one on your left, in your glory.”

Jesus responded, “You do not know what you are asking.”

After telling again what was ahead, Mark tells us the other disciples were angry with James and John for seeking the positions of honor. And this elicited from Jesus these words:

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize by their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant...

I find Mark’s framing of Jesus’ story fascinating. Could he say any more clearly, “The disciples just didn’t get it!” Hovering over and under these episodes is the implication that the disciples were not at all open to suffering, pain and death. In Jesus they must have sensed they had someone very special and it was their hope that as he ascended in the human drama they would be brushed with his glory. He simply couldn’t get through to them what he had come to realize as the issue of his life and calling. The shadow of the cross was falling on him and they were too dull or intentionally refused to hear him. Their agenda’s goal was glory; Jesus promised suffering and rejection.

Portraying the blindness of the disciples, Mark is showing what following Jesus involves, what is the way of discipleship. What the disciples resist Mark makes explicit from the teaching of Jesus.

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. (Mark 8:32-34)

Tough words, Jesus! No wonder the disciples were intentionally dull; no wonder they didn’t get it. Jesus was possessed by his calling. He wrestled with the temptations to use his charisma, his spiritual power to impress, to gain power, whether with ecclesiastical institutions or political establishment. But, as Luke tells the Temptations story, Jesus prevailed, determined to worship and serve God faithfully, fully. And, realizing the implications of the obedience he sensed as his calling, he knew there would be confrontation, conflict, rejection, suffering and, ultimately, death. No wonder he died alone. And thus my claim made at the beginning of this meditation is not surprising:

The way of Jesus is the road not taken.

As I said when I began, this is a serious charge but, I tell you truthfully, I believe it deeply. I can document in my own Christian experience, how I became gripped by the way of Jesus. Without recounting what for me was a long arduous journey that continues to the present, let me just say that I believe the way of Jesus as that to which he called his disciples and which he embodied was swallowed up in the early centuries of the Christian church. In place of the Jesus of history who faced the established powers of Church and State, that early movement by the fourth century had a high Christology that identified Jesus with God, the consequence of the Council of Nicea called by the Roman Emperor Constantine in 325 C.E.

Constantine's edict making the Christian religion the religion of the Empire might seem to be a great triumph. I am convinced it was the co-opting of the church. I'm obviously making huge leaps and controversial claims which will be countered by many, by most interpreters of the Christian story I suppose. Nonetheless what was happening in this evolving story was that Jesus was transformed from the historical figure who with non-violent resistance challenged temple and empire to a savior figure who came to die for the sin of the world.

It is one thing to seek forgiveness for one's sin.
It is quite another to follow the way of Jesus.

Now the church became an institute of salvation, domesticated from a movement of Jesus people committed to challenge the world's domination systems through non-violent resistance.

In recent decades historical Jesus research has put Jesus in his historical context, a time of Imperial domination by Rome and the Temple authorities trying to survive through collaboration. Jesus challenged all of that – non-violently – and for that he was crucified.

Again, the way of Jesus has been for the Church the road not taken.

Where that road has been taken it has resulted in peril and, most often, death. What I am trying to say is best understood in stories, in this case the stories of some who have sought to follow the way of Jesus.

Yesterday was the sixty-sixth anniversary of the execution of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It was in the 1960's as I was studying in Europe that I came on Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*. I was overcome with the faith, the courage, the brilliance, the total commitment to what he understood was the way to which he was being called, to resist the Nazi regime and that evil darkness Hitler was bringing to the German nation and to all of Europe. He was at heart a pacifist believing that was the way to fully follow Jesus. Yet as the horror of Nazi atrocities spread, especially the violence being visited on the Jews, even though

he would at the beginning not know the full extent of the death camps, Bonhoeffer joined in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler. He wrestled in his own conscience but finally believed he must act even against his own convictions of non-violence.

Just days before the Allied troops liberated the camp at Flossenburg in southern Germany, on the order of Hitler as the war was ending, Bonhoeffer was hung. He met his death calmly, bowing in prayer and meeting his fate at peace.

Bonhoeffer has been my companion through many a Lent as I am amazed anew at the heroic obedience of his following the way of Jesus. I recently finished a new biography of Bonhoeffer, once again mesmerized by the life of this modern disciple of Jesus whose last words were,

This is the end – for me the beginning of life.

During those dark days on the European continent there was playing out another drama which has also been critical in my own understanding of the way of Jesus. It is the story written by a Jewish ethicist and philosopher who had been researching the awful evil of the Nazi terror. He became so depressed by the horror that he searched out the story of a village in the French Alps that became a city of refuge rescuing thousands of refugees from the Nazi terror. Philip Hallie tells the story in a book entitled *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*. The center of the story is a French Huguenot pastor, André Trocmé, but it is a story about a whole village, following his example in following the way of Jesus.

Trocmé was born into a rather well-to-do family and had a very privileged childhood. Early on his mother was killed in an auto accident, and he lived in a French Huguenot, French Reformed home in which his father's spirituality was very quiet. But there was so much feeling in André that he could never really let loose until he joined a youth organization in France in his village, in which he was exposed to a very personal relationship with Jesus Christ, and in that experience came himself to a very personal relationship. As a young man, he began to be shaped by the vision of Jesus.

One day, during the First World War, his village being occupied by German soldiers, a German soldier said to him, "Would you like some bread? Are you hungry?" He said, "No, I'm not hungry, and if I were, I wouldn't take bread from you because you are the enemy." And the soldier said to him, "No, I'm not the enemy. You don't understand who I am. I'm a Christian." And André said to him, "My brother is fighting in the war, and you would kill my brother." He said, "No, I would not kill your brother." André said, "But, you're a soldier." He said, "Yes, but I don't carry a gun. They allow me, as a telegraph officer, to do my duty without carrying a gun because Jesus has said that I must not kill."

The genuineness of this German soldier so impressed André that he took him to his youth organization where the German soldier shared his witness for Jesus. That witness of that German soldier made such a deep impression on him, the German soldier having come to his conviction because of his relationship to Jesus Christ, that André could never get that out of his mind and it started him on the road to pacifism.

This encounter so deeply impacted Trocmé that for the rest of his life he lived by the imperative to do no harm to another. Trocmé eventually studied theology at the University of Paris and became a French Reformed pastor. One evening in a men's group, Trocmé was discussing a book that claimed Jesus was a myth created by St. Paul. Trocmé refuted the book's claim but found himself asking the question:

If Jesus really walked upon this earth, why do we keep treating him as if he were a disembodied, impossibly idealistic ethical theory? If he was a real man, then the Sermon on the Mount was made for people on this earth; and, if he existed, God has shown us in flesh and blood what goodness is for flesh-and-blood people. (p. 68)

The rest of his life was a living out of the Sermon on the Mount. The events of the village of Le Chambon during the German occupation of France during World War II, the story as told by Hallie, is wonderfully moving and inspiring.

I suspect what was so powerful for me was the connection between Trocmé's total living out of the Sermon on the Mount as the catalyst for the magnificent compassion and love that was embodied in the village as it became a city of refuge.

To read the life of Bonhoeffer, to read the story of André Trocmé and the village of Le Chambon moves me. Inwardly I know there is something in those stories that reveals life as God intended it to be lived. And I wonder...

Will the world ever be changed without the suffering of those who live by the way of Jesus? Is it only through the death of the non-violent resister of evil that the world is changed? Jesus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Bonhoeffer? Is there any hint in the current "Arab Spring" that maybe the lessons of non-violence are being learned even amidst the present chaos?

I do not believe we are all called in the same fashion. I do not believe we are all called to seek the place where the battle is raging. Neither do I think the radical obedience of a Bonhoeffer or a Trocmé is something one seeks out. Rather, when faced with such a situation, then one is called to obedience.

The issues I raise can be debated endlessly but to no avail. Such a vision of a world where evil is overcome by good, where the nations make war no more and

the world knows the *Shalom* of God is a vision that must arise from within one. It cannot be embraced because of the plea of a preacher or call of a statesman. No, I sense it arises from within one as a fruit of the spirit where one has been overwhelmed by the magnificence of Jesus and the road he chose – the road still not taken by most of the church that bears his name, but a road that beckons us again in this Lenten season as we journey with Jesus to Jerusalem.

Let George Bernard Shaw have the last word: “The only trouble with Christianity is that it has never been tried.”

References:

Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Letters and Papers From Prison*. First published 1953; Touchstone reprint edition, 1997.

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