Fork in the Road

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Yogi Berra played baseball for the New York Yankees and has become famous for his non-sequitur expressions. One of his nonsensical expressions became the headliner for his book: “When you come to a fork in a road, take it.”

Alice in Wonderland came to a fork in the road. She didn’t know which fork to take so she asked a Cheshire cat, watching from a tree above, “Will you tell me, please, which way I ought to go.”

“That depends,” said the wily cat.

“On what,” asked Alice?

“On your destination,” said the cat. “Where are you going?”

“I don’t know,” Alice stammered.

“Then,” said the cat with a grin, “it doesn’t matter which way you go.”

“So long as I get somewhere,” Alice hastened to add.

“Oh,” said the cat, “you’re sure to do that if you walk long enough.”

I can identify with Alice’s predicament. When I come to a fork in the road, the way forward isn’t always clear. The advice of the Cheshire cat that it doesn’t matter which way I go doesn’t help matters. My final destination matters to me.

I want to end up in the right place.

How do I know what God wants me to do with my life? The role of God’s will in relation to my will is not always obvious. Today’s story is all about human choice and divine sovereignty.

Last Sunday, we focused on Jesus’ ascension into heaven. Luke tells the story of Jesus’ ascent into heaven in the closing verses of his gospel and then retells it in the opening chapter of Acts. Jesus directs his disciples, “Do not leave Jerusalem but wait for the gift God has promised” (Acts 1:4).

These eleven do as they are told, return to Jerusalem and gather in an upper room. There are 120 believers in attendance. There are 120 believers in attendance. One hundred twenty is a curious number, given that there are originally 12 apostles and 120 is 10x12.

I suspect Peter, impetuous Peter, can’t wait any longer. He proposes that they can at least find Judas’s replacement while they are waiting since Judas went AWOL and betrayed Jesus with a kiss. He sees parallels between Judas’s act of betrayal and the Psalms. Then, he goes on to remind everyone how Judas buys a field with his betrayal money,
falls down, dies a grisly death and is buried there.

Matthew, however, tells a different story. After his betrayal, Judas shows remorse, returns the money and takes his own life. The religious authorities use this “blood money” to buy the field in which Judas is buried.

So which is it? Critics of the Bible are quick to jump all over this apparent discrepancy. It’s unclear whether Judas actually buys the field or the religious leaders buy it for him. The circumstances of Judas’s death as a suicide or accidental are ambiguous, also. The Scribes who painstakingly copied the Bible could have easily cleaned up this story and could have air-brushed the subtle differences out of the text. Instead, they allow these discrepancies to stand. The fact that the Bible hasn’t been harmonized is one the surest evidences of its authenticity.

Peter believes it’s in the best interests of Jesus’ followers to restore the apostolic circle to 12. Didn’t Jesus talk earlier in his ministry about God’s kingdom having 12 apostles sitting on 12 thrones representing the 12 tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:27-28)?

Peter suggests two criteria in selecting Judas’s replacement. First, in verse 21, an Apostle must be an eyewitness to Jesus’ ministry from the beginning. Peter wants to insure that any future Apostle was a traveling companion of Jesus’s and is thereby taught by him. Second, as stipulated in verse 22, an Apostle must be a witness to Jesus’ resurrection.

The community puts forward two names in nomination. One is named Joseph (no relation to Jesus’ father) who also goes by the nickname Bar-sabbas, meaning “son of the Sabbath.” Presumably, this means Joseph was born on the Sabbath. How ironic that Judas is also called “son of the Sabbath” (Acts 15:22). Matthias is the other person nominated as a replacement Apostle.

We read, in verse 24, that they pray about their selection. Their prayer is instructive: “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry.” Then, according to verse 26, they cast lots. Casting lots was commonplace in Scripture. There are 70 references to casting lots in the Old Testament. The New Testament records Zechariah is chosen priest for a day by means of a lottery (Luke 1:9). When Jesus hangs on the cross, the soldiers cast lots for his robe (John 19:29).

Casting lots means quite literally to roll the dice. The dice on your screen were excavated from a first century Roman village and are comparable to the dice used in our story. This may seem like an odd way to choose a candidate. But, hey, it would have saved
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us a ton of money in the last presidential election. These early Christians didn’t take a vote to determine the outcome. They simply prayed about the decision and rolled the dice. They did everything humanly possible and trusted God to be at work in rolling the dice.

The lot falls to Matthias to replace Judas. It’s the last we hear of Matthias, although tradition has it he becomes a missionary to the Ethiopians.

They pray and roll the dice. I wouldn’t necessarily advise this method of decision-making whenever you come to a fork in the road. But there’s something to be said for it, especially for those of us plagued with indecision. Sometimes all we know to do is pray and roll the dice. We do what we can and trust the results to God.

People often ask, “How can I know God’s will for my life?” Let me suggest four principles from this passage as to how to know God’s will.

First, God’s will is known through Scripture. Peter’s familiarity with Scripture enables him to make sense of Judas’s betrayal in view of the Psalms.

Most of our questions about God’s will are personal in nature. What school should I attend? What career path do I choose? What cell phone plan should I buy? You know, important decisions that affect our personal lives.

Scripture doesn’t function like a magic eight ball telling us specifically what to do. Scripture teaches principles to guide our decision-making. That’s why we encourage you to immerse yourself in Scripture.

Second, God’s will is known through community. The community nominates Joseph and Matthias for the job. The community discerns the people with the leadership gifts requisite for the task at hand. We don’t make good decisions in isolation from each other. That’s why we talk so much about cultivating spiritual friends. We need the counsel of mature believers.

Our Session is currently reading a book about knowing God’s will. It’s entitled Pursuing God’s Will Together. The premise of the author, Ruth Haley Barton, is that the primary job of church leadership is to discern God’s will and then to align our church to do it. It won’t do us any good to discern God’s will apart from actually being willing to do it.

Margaret Thatcher’s death was in the news recently. The “Iron Lady” as she was called, was quite controversial. I didn’t know until recently that she was a practicing Christian. She spoke several years ago to the annual convention of the Church of Scotland. She was speaking about the relative merits of democracy, which, as you know, operates by majority
“...I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.”
- Thomas Merton

rule. Yet, she also hastened to add, “Ideally, when Christians meet, as Christians, to take counsel together, their purpose is not (or should not be) to ascertain what is the mind of the majority, but what is the mind of the Holy Spirit.”

We want to know the mind of the Holy Spirit. That’s why we gather in community, because one primary way God’s will is known is through community.

Third, God’s will is known through prayer. These believers petition God, “Show us which of these two you have chosen.” One of the principle ways God’s will is revealed is through prayer.

This past Thursday was the National Day of Prayer. It was also, according to the American Humanist Association, the National Day of Reason. The Freedom from Religion Foundation ran a full page ad in the Post on May 2nd mocking the National Day of Prayer. The ad reads, “Nothing fails like prayer. The solution to humanity’s problems won’t ever come from above. It’s time to place our best energies in make this world better, this world our paradise.”

Really? This world is our paradise? I join them in wanting to make this world better, but I find their words, “nothing fails like prayer,” to be a punch in the gut. Prayer is foundational in the Christian life. I have found through the years that prayer doesn’t change God’s mind; prayer changes me. I’m tempted to pray, ‘God show me what you want me to do and I’ll do it if it agrees with me.’ I don’t always want God’s will to be done. I want my will to be done. I’m asking God to change me and bring me to the place where Jesus’ prayer, “Not my will but yours be done,” becomes my prayer.

Fourth, God’s will is known through circumstances. I deliberately list this principle last since circumstances can be deceiving. It’s only as I weigh God’s counsel through Scripture, prayer and trusted believers that the trend of circumstances becomes relevant. F.B. Myer wrote, “When we want to know God’s will, there are three things which always agree: the inward impulse, the Word of God, and the trend of circumstances.”

I resonate with Thomas Merton’s prayer, “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.” Amen!