

“A Step Along the Road: Deciding on a Direction”  
Joshua 24:14-18; Acts 9:1-19;  
John 17:14-26

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As I was thinking about this Sunday, I had this phrase come to my mind. It was basically: which way did he go? Some of you may remember Looney Tunes used that phrase many years ago. When I looked it up, I found out many of their various characters had used that phrase, which had come from the movie version of “Of Mice and Men,” based on the book by John Steinbeck. It was the character that was a little less intelligent who kept saying, “Which way did he go?”

This phrase came to mind because in some ways it feels like it’s the question that is so often before us. Which way do we go? Thinking through it, sometimes it’s just “which way do I go” to find the dream that is suggested by the phrase. And, for us this option is always coming up.

It’s really nice when you have a clear, straight path, but life is not always like that. Life is a little more like tracks in a train yard with many different tracks with switches leading from one to another. There are all these options and all these voices and ideas about which way to go. And to go down the road we need to take a step. What step do we take?

That’s where Joshua was at in today’s scripture. He was at the end of his life. He had led his people into the Promised Land. He now said, “I’m going the way of all people,” which means he was going to die, and he wanted his people to decide what they were going to do with their collective existence, their life. So he asked, “Who do you choose?” He said, “I know who we choose. For me and my family, we choose to serve the Lord.” He said, “It’s an important decision because there are consequences, and depending on what you decide, things won’t go well for you.” He was a little more dire than that, the way he said it. But he invites them to make that choice, to make that first step down the road, to choose who they will serve.

When the United States decided to declare independence from the King in England it was so that we could have self-determination. That’s what we’re celebrating this week, is that move away from having a king across the ocean determining what we are doing. I wonder if we don’t have a little bit of hubris in the idea that then we’re going to have self-determination because my sense is I never can see down the tracks well enough to know exactly where it’s going to take me, what’s going to happen. To say that I’m completely self-determined—well, yeah, I might take a direction but part of that is the direction, the circumstances.

We can decide a direction, we can take a step. Even in taking the step to decide to serve the Lord, it isn’t over. I think about what happened with Paul. Paul was sure he was serving the Lord. So sure that his understanding of what God wanted—that he should persecute these new folks that were being called the people of the Way. There

can't be a new way. It's hard to accept a new way. Paul wasn't accepting a new way. There's no new way around. He was so sure. What did it take to convince him otherwise? It took an act of God to change his mind. It makes me wonder how many times I get so sure of a way that it takes an act of God to change my mind. In some ways, isn't that the case for humanity? It took an act of God to try to change our minds. You might think of Jesus as that act of God that is there to help change our minds.

One of the reasons that I find it's hard to change my mind is because I get comfortable with what I know. I like to be certain, so there is the temptation to make sure that nothing disturbs that certainty. Putting your head in the sand and making sure you can't hear is an illustration of that, but there's another similar idea—the idea of having a blind eye toward something. I don't know if you know where that phrase comes from. It comes from an English sea battle. Lord Nelson was one of the Admirals. They were getting a signal from the commander-in-chief to retreat. They used signal flags at that time. So Admiral Nelson said, "Give me the telescope and let me look and see that signal." Well, he happened to be blind in one eye, so he held the telescope up to his blind eye. He said, "I don't see the signal. Let's go." He went on to lead the English to victory.

Now, we don't always think of turning a blind eye toward something or sticking our head in the sand as something that is helpful. Oftentimes we turn a blind eye to things that we need to see. In some ways, we can think of Paul as turning a blind eye to what God was doing in Jesus, and it took an act of God to change his mind.

One of the consequences of turning a blind eye to things, the consequences of sticking my head in the sand and not wanting to hear things that I don't want to hear, is that my life becomes unbalanced, but I think it is balanced. I give weight to something that should not have that much weight and things that should have weight, I don't give enough weight. So I think my life is balanced, but that's a figment of my imagination. It can't really happen.

To be sanctified is to be dedicated to or to be really engaged, to fully accept. When Jesus goes on to say we need to be sanctified in the truth, what he's saying is that we need to be sanctified in reality, and that reality is the word of God. We, as humans, will always be deciding what is reality because there is always something we're going to look to to make our decisions. It could be something as simple as reason as our reality, and we think that it is what is central to us and can make our decisions for us. Certainly the Enlightenment thought that's all it took is to have reason in our lives. We rated reason really high and thought it balanced out everything else. I happen to think that's not true. We need that sense of being something more, a recognition of God who created and creates, who enables, who reveals what is needed for life.

The point is, I can live in an imaginary world, but the real world is often very different than that imaginary world. We can make up all kinds of ways that we think the world should work or even believe it does work, and find that's not really quite the way it is. I don't know about you, but I keep running up against that reality in myself. I keep

thinking the world works one way and it doesn't. Or I keep thinking that I certainly have achieved a certain level of being able to do things and find that I haven't. I particularly find that around balancing self and others and how easy it is to give myself so much more weight than I give to the care of others. And yet I hear Jesus inviting me to be sanctified in reality, to recognize, for example, that caring for others is much more important than caring how I look. That's just one simple example.

He goes on to talk about how we have a Righteous Father. I love that phrase, partly because, as you probably know, I love righteousness and I think scripture tells us it's really important. But what it pointed me to was the idea that a righteous father is a father in right relationship, which points me to the Trinity, which is something everybody always wants to know more about, right?

I think in general we've said, "The Trinity—oh, that's an interesting concept. Let's leave it to the side." But in recent years there have been some really interesting ways of thinking about the Trinity – the Trinity as the dance of love that is going on between Father, Spirit, and Son. From my perspective, we're so focused on breaking things down into their individual pieces we forget that the whole is really important and that sometimes the whole creates the parts. The Trinity, then, has persons and has its own dance of community.

One way to think about it a little bit is, individuals can come together to make up something that they couldn't be on their own. A flock of birds, when they come together, can suddenly begin to make all kinds of wonderful shapes that a single bird couldn't make on its own.

When Jesus talks about a righteous father, he's talking about a father who cares about right relationships, healthy relationships, relationships that create unity, that create a oneness that doesn't get rid of all the individuals, but it is all the individuals that make that oneness, that begin to shape something new. It is that new life, that new thing, that new family that Jesus is inviting us to walk into, and in doing so, to find that there is a whole that we might be part of—a unity of Father and Son, of Son and disciples, and of disciples with disciples and with non-disciples.

It is as we're invited forward to communion, we are invited to gather around the table to be formed into a family. We come as individuals, yet we become something greater. What Jesus is talking about in this passage is that as we become that family, the very love of God can come in and be with us, reside with us as he resides with us. That leads me to recognize that each day of my life, each next step, is a choice to serve God in community so that the love of God can be known, that I might know it and that it might be known in how we live our lives. What I find is, that's a choice I have to make every day because it's so easy to make other kinds of choices, selfish choices, societally influenced choices. But the choice to serve the Lord and to allow that love to enter is a choice we make each day and it's that first step on the road to being the people of the Way. Amen.