



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
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THE CHOSEN PATH

Philippians 2:5-11; Mark 11:1-11

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Occasionally when we begin a new venture, we are forced to change course or turn back. A business plan, which seemed perfect, is abandoned in this pandemic. Teachers have been forced to change their ways of teaching and some students have had to adjust to learning remotely. College students are discerning the best ways to navigate higher education. A serious illness may force a change of plans about a career, retirement, or travel. Sometimes, changing course may be the wisest thing to do. At other times, staying on a chosen path may be the hardest thing, but the right thing, to do

When Jesus approached Jerusalem, he knew what he had to do. He would fulfill his destiny in the city of David. He would be arrested, beaten, crucified, and rise again. He had every reason to turn back, but one. He had chosen this path. Or, better yet, he accepted the path God had chosen for his life.

He would fulfill the prophecy of Zechariah that the long-awaited king would enter the city not as a fierce monarch riding on a horse to wage war, but as a gentle king riding on a donkey to bring peace. Jesus knew the scorn, suffering, and death that lay ahead. As Paul wrote in Philippians, "Although Jesus was in the form of God, ...he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave... he humbled himself, and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." There was no turning back.

How did Jesus know he was doing the right thing? We think it was easy for Jesus because he was God's son. If we read the gospels carefully, we see that it was a struggle for him. He faced great resistance from the very people who should have supported him. The priests, Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and lawyers found him to be a threat to their understanding of God. The political powers, from the Jewish Sanhedrin to the Roman governor, found him to be a danger to the established order. Once, even his own family tried to take him home because the neighbors said he was out of his mind; Peter stood in his path and tried to dissuade him from the path of suffering and death.

How did he know he was doing the right thing? First of all, Jesus spent time with God in prayer. He took time to step back from the fray and be alone with God. He knew that prayer is not only about speaking to God but listening for God. Prayer is communion with God. In prayer, Jesus was one with God.

Secondly, Jesus knew the Scriptures. His thoughts were grounded in the law of Moses, the teachings of the prophets, and the story of God's people. He learned how to read situations and challenges in light of the Word of God. Jesus came to understand that the path of the Messiah was not the path of political victory, but the path of suffering love.

The third way he knew he was on the right path was that he kept his mind

and heart focused on the needs of others. He knew there was no turning back from Jerusalem because he was living his life for others. God sent him into the world to embody holy love. God sent him to Calvary to bring freedom and salvation to you and me. Jesus put his trust in God. There was no turning back. No matter what happened, God would vindicate him.

How do we know we are on the right path? First, we listen to God as Jesus did. We listen as those who are willing to be taught. If we are always sure that we are right, or if we always insist on our own way, then we cannot listen and learn. We live in a time of impatience and overstimulation. It takes self-discipline to shut out the cacophony that surrounds us and the noisy thoughts within us; it takes time to give ourselves over to listening for God. We need to listen to what God may be saying to us through the voices of others, but we also need to step back, be calm, and wait for God in prayer.

I remember the day that I received an email from a member of the church who had a prayerful vision of heaven during surgery. She wrote, "In heaven it is all about love and peace, and all the other stuff we worry about just isn't even on the radar. I'm sure God gets frustrated with us ... in a loving way [of course]." Some Christians live their whole lives and never understand that through prayer God gets our priorities straight. We discern God's path for our lives through prayer.

Secondly, just like Jesus, we need to know the Scriptures. We need to know how to read the situations we face considering the Biblical story. Reading our challenges through the lens of Scripture is not the same thing as finding a “proof text” for every situation. Reading the needs of this day through the Bible means interpreting social and moral issues in light of the great sweeping themes of the Bible. The Bible tells the story of God’s good and beautiful creation, God’s mighty acts of deliverance, God’s unconditional love for a sinful world, and God’s creation of a new family of faith in Jesus, the church, where all are welcome.

One of the most beautiful people I have ever known served as a church organist for almost forty years. By the time I came to be the pastor of that congregation, Margaret was retired and in her 80’s. She had grown up out in the country, in a large family. She had grown up with sharp divisions between race and class, blacks and whites, and landowners and tenant farmers. I never knew her to be anything but gracious, respectful, and welcoming to every person she met. She was openminded, loving, and generous. She told me about her family and the values they taught her. She talked about studying organ at Westminster Choir College and hearing Einstein play his violin through an open window in Princeton. These experiences shaped her and made her open to the work of God in the world.

There was one thing more. All those years at the organ bench practicing the great hymns of the church, learning sacred music, and leading the church in worship shaped her. How could you play such beautiful

music and not see beauty in the world? How could you hear the great texts of sacred music, listen to the stories of Scripture, and not see the world through the eyes of God? She knew who she was and who God called her to be. God had set a path for her life and there was no turning back. It is the way things are when your life is shaped by the Bible and when you practice and practice your faith every day. You come to know God and, in knowing God, you know yourself. You become rooted in God, open to the world, and alive to the life God has called you to live.

The Scriptures give us a place to stand and new eyes to see. Learning to read our lives through the lens of Scripture is a way to guide our path in the pathways of God. We want this for our children too. We read the stories of the Bible with our children and engage them in worship, Sunday School, and youth activities. We want their commitments, values, and lives to be in line with the gospel. We raise our children to become all that God created them to be and to follow the path God has for their lives.

How do we know we are on the right path? Finally, like Jesus, we keep before us the truth that we are living our lives not for ourselves but for others. We keep before us the great commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. When we seek the good of others first, everything else pretty much falls into place.

A young man I know is living his life for others. The son of immigrants from Lebanon, he came to the church I served through the youth group. One Sunday, George heard an elder in the congregation speak about the World Food Program responding to

famine in Africa. After his junior year in college, he served as a summer intern for the World Food Program. In Uganda, he saw a school built out of sticks for orphans with AIDs. He found out that it took about 30,000 dollars to build a school. If a community built a school, then the government would supply the teachers. He returned to college and raised more than 50,000 dollars to build the school and provide all the books and uniforms for the children. He took a post-graduate award he received and used that money to create an organization called *Building Tomorrow*. Flash forward. Today *Building Tomorrow* has constructed 81 schools and hired 50 Ugandan college graduates as fellows to work with 200 schools to educate more than 50,000 students in Uganda, many of whom had never been to school before. All this, because one young man named George saw the path that Jesus had for his life to love and educate the children of Uganda. No obstacle and no challenge could turn him aside.

All who go by the name of Jesus, who live as followers of Christ, no longer live for ourselves, but live for others. The commandment to love others is at the very heart of our faith. It is the commandment that guides our path through life. Everything we do, whether it is raising a child, establishing a school, working in a nursing home, selling real estate, making and distributing medicines, or feeding the hungry, we do because Jesus showed us on that first Palm Sunday the power of love for a world in need.

How do we know that we are on the path God has chosen for us? We look to Jesus, the Son of God. We listen to

God through prayer as Jesus listened to God. We read our lives in the light of Scripture as he read his life through the stories of God's people. We keep ever before us the needs of others as Jesus kept those same needs before him.

Like Jesus, whatever path we choose to take, we know that God is near, and God will not let us fail.