

Once, while traveling alone, the poet Robert Frost stood at a fork in the road, undecided which path to take. Finally, he chose one, but as he did he recognized the implications of his choice and said, "... knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back." Frost then concluded:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads converged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Frost was not unique in this experience as the wide popularity of this poem makes clear. Most people find themselves at a crossroads sometime during their lives. A decision is called for - and frequently, the decision makes all the difference. There is a kind of irreversibility about much of life.

We must recognize, however, that often there is that within us which predisposes us to take the path we do. Commentator Louis Untermeyer says of Robert Frost and this poem that, "The poet's 'difference' is in him from the beginning, long before he sets out on his career. The road that he took was not only the 'different' road, the right road for him, but the only road he could have taken." What we are, in other words, influences the direction in which we move. The great moments of decision that confront us are affected by moods and makeup. We clearly choose, but our prior experiences color the choices we make as we go.

The determination of Jesus to face humiliation and death upon the cross is the supreme example to which we can refer. In Luke's Gospel we read that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem" - the very place where opposition and danger awaited him. He walked into trouble with his eyes wide open and his head held high, saying, "I lay down my life . . . No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to lay it down."

Samuel Johnson contended that, "Nothing so focuses one's mind as the news that one is to be hanged in the morning!" Let me tell you, Jesus' mind was focused as he traveled that road to Jerusalem. He knew what he was facing. While his disciples did not fully understand what lay in store for him, it was clear to Jesus. He saw what others dare not see.

The story of that first Palm Sunday, is about an incredible courage, - punctuated by the moments of acute loneliness of one so courageous. This courage is about a love that is ready to risk. Courage that is affectively charged - full of the feelings of connection. Like wisdom, it has an inner core of eagerness. And, there was an urgency about Jesus' mission in Jerusalem.

He would go first to the temple. There, he would have an ultimate confrontation with the powerful, religious leadership of his time. On their own turf, he would come face to face with those whom he had previously attacked as "hypocrites, blind guides, blind fools, snakes, and vipers, who were guilty of spilling innocent blood." They were those who diminished or violated others' dignity and right to feel that they fully belonged in the human family.

Further, Jesus had allowed his disciples to break Jewish laws and then defended them against those critics by saying that rules were less important than one's attitudes and motivations. This was no gentle Jesus, meek and mild striding into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday! There would be conflict between him and the established powers and he was bringing it. In effect, he would be signing his own death warrant and he knew it!

The Gospel is not the absence of conflict. It is the use of conflict to further God's domination-free reign. Jesus, in fact, declares conflict to be the inevitable consequence of his confrontation of domination in all its forms. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Mat. 10:34). The sword Jesus brings is not a sword of violence, but the sword of the Spirit. That sword cuts through the tissues of deceit and exposes the corruption of the body politic, and that inevitably invokes violence from the powers that be. Exposure does not depotentiate the powers; it simply makes them more vicious. They will bend all their might to destroy those who threaten their existence. That was certainly what we see in the aftermath of that first Palm Sunday!

The response Jesus taught is not a means of securing tranquillity, but rather a way of forcing evil out of its hideouts, stripping away its disguises, and eventually transforming it into something good. For Jesus, that transformation was the power of the kingdom of God.

The gospel is not idealistic or sentimental about evil; but moves against perceived injustice proactively. Unfortunately, a long history of misinterpretation has misled Christians into believing that Jesus taught non-resistance to evil, - requiring believers to be "whimpish" in the face of evil, to endure humiliation without seeking recourse to justice, to let others strike us and walk all over us in the name of Jesus. But Jesus does not counsel non-resistance to evil. Rather, he said, "Do not return evil in kind; do not fight evil with its own weaponry."

Theologian Walter Wink contends that Jesus calls us to a third type of response. Wink writes,

Jesus said, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." This does not mean that we should let another knock us around with no concern for our own safety or rights. The blow envisioned is a back hand, not a blow with a fist (*right* cheek), and it is intended to humiliate, not injure. Jesus is urging his audience to defy a master by turning the cheek, thus rendering him incapable of striking again. (The nose is now in the way of a backhand, and he cannot use a fist, since that would establish their equality - the last thing the master wants to do.) The slave or subordinate is saying, in effect, "I refuse to be cowed any longer by you. I am a human being, just like you." The master may have such an underling flogged within an inch of his life, but the point has been made and cannot be unmade: the domination system has been breached, and its captives are being delivered.

And when that happens, the reign of God - God's domination-free order - is happening with power in that moment.

Jesus embodied a third way. He neither advocated returning evil for evil, nor suggested that you become a "doormat." Jesus' way was to always embrace your dignity as a person of God's creation who is equally committed to restoring it to those who have been disenfranchised in society by those in authority whose power is abusive.

Jesus heard the beat of a different drum. He chose the road less traveled by. He had God's orders in his hand and laying his life on the line, he marched into Jerusalem to make plain the difference between God's ways and the world's. Jesus, sought to restore human dignity and value to everyone who was being deprived of it by anybody, anywhere, anytime.

- He touched lepers! They were outcasts. They wrapped themselves in rags and were required to yell out "unclean" when anyone might come near them. Jesus touched these people affirming their dignity. He lovingly brought them back into the human family.

- The Samaritans were a minority group hated by the Jews. He told the story of the "Good Samaritan" that taught a new perspective, created a new regard for an ostracized people.

- Women of His day were not equals to men. They were as property to men. Like children, they were not even counted in the population. They had to remain in an outer court in the temple. Men were not to speak to women publicly. Jesus, the Jew, spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well in the very center of the village - affirming her full worth in the human family before God, all the town's people and his disciples.

He said and did outrageous things. He ate with sinners, tax-gatherers, prostitutes. For Jesus, there were no out groups, no outcasts - everyone was welcome at his party. He embraced the sick and the dying, the emotionally disturbed, the poor and the children. and that is the very community into which Christ calls us when he says, "follow me!" Scott Peck, author of The Road Less Traveled says in his book, The Different Drum,

Community is and must be inclusive. The great enemy of community is exclusivity But for most groups it's easier to exclude than to include. Clubs and organizations (he continues) give little thought to being inclusive unless the law compels them to do so. True communities on the other hand, if they want to remain such, are always reaching out to extend themselves. The burden of the proof (says Peck) falls upon exclusivity. True communities do not ask "How can we justify taking this person in?" Instead, the question is, "Is it at all justifiable to keep this person out?"

In the mind of Christ it was never justifiable to keep one out. The kingdom of God is meant to be wholly inclusive. As the Good Shepherd, Jesus said, he would leave the ninety-nine in the fold to go in search for one who was lost. Because, as Mother Teresa has put it, "Being unwanted is the worst disease any human being can experience. Unless there are willing hands to serve and a loving heart to care, it is incurable!"

And that's what Jesus was all about on that first Palm Sunday. That's what Jesus' love in anger was all about when he came to upset the established order in the temple, turning the money changing tables upside down, proclaiming it, "A House of Prayer for all people." The temple was designed with an outer court for Gentiles. Moving in, the next court was for women - they could go no further. Next, the court of men. Finally the inner court for priests and last, the temple curtain behind which was the "Holy of Holies." Everyone had to pay temple taxes, surcharges for changing currency into shekles, offerings of sheep or goats for the wealthy, and doves for others. The temple design and dealings so grossly misrepresented the true relationships between God and human souls as to suggest that various degrees of alienation reflected God's intention.

Jesus' mission was that through him, the *world* would be reconciled to God. He gave his life to break down the humanly constructed walls of segregation by nationality, gender, class, etc. That's why the temple curtain before the Holy of Holies split in two and the moment of his death. It was the Divine Yes! To the reality of inclusivity and equal accessibility to the heart of God by every human soul.

Friends, it isn't enough that we simply believe that - give intellectual assent to such - it must begin to drive us, to be the most compelling force within us in living our lives. Hear these words of theologian, Jurgen Moltman:

... faith, wherever it develops into hope, causes not rest but unrest, not patience but impatience. It does not calm the unquiet heart, but is itself this unquiet heart. Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goal of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present.

2,000 years ago, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem, for the purpose of illustrating how profoundly, every human soul is yearned for in the heart of God. And for those very efforts, the powers that be, had him killed within the week.

He calls us now, among all the competing voices of this world. Still he calls to us, in the deepest recesses of our hearts to listen for that different drum - to follow him home through life on a path that at times is unclear and confusing, that is frequently in conflict with the culture, inviting us into vulnerability and service to "the least of these" of his. To identify with him in his great cause is to join him on the road less traveled by, and such a pilgrimage will for us, make all the difference! Amen.