

“The Road Taken”

Dear God of all,
Breathe through the heat of our desire
Your comfort and your balm
Speak to us through the tumult of our lives
In the still, small voice of calm. Amen

For any of you who have been in my office you have noticed that I have a wall of crosses. These crosses come from many different places and many different people. One is golden and shiny like a Christmas tree ornament. A cross from Haiti is made up of many faces. One is a tiny version of the San Damiano cross; the cross that St. Francis prayed to, and a cross with a rooster in the center as a reminder of my many mission trips to The Dominican Republic. It is amazing how an instrument of torture has become a symbol of hope, peace, and love for billions of people today and over the centuries.

In the last part of today’s passage Jesus tells his disciples, and you and me, “If **any** want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” For most of my life I have heard this passage and did not connect it to the words that come after. What I was told and what I thought about was the burden I was supposed to pick up as in the cross I must bear. That cross was the burden of sin that I must trudge through life carrying. I was to be miserable and downcast as I carried that load of my sin. All the while I was to try to repent, but the load would just get heavier from the sins that I continue to commit. I was an awful, sinning person who is beyond hope.

Over time I have learned to read this passage, and indeed the entirety of the Bible through a different lens. The lens not of my failings, but the lens of God’s redeeming love. I have realized that Jesus’ message is not one of misery and burden but one of full and abundant life. Jesus came to free us from our sins not to heap more scorn and misery on us. Jesus never denied someone a cure or a blessing because of their past sins. He never denied someone love because they had made grievous mistakes. When Jesus calls out to us to follow him he tells us that his yoke is easy and his burden was light.¹

Our cross is not a punishment or a sign of our lack of worth. Our cross is to follow Jesus’ example of love and forgiveness. Like Peter, who in the previous verses Jesus calls both a rock and a stumbling block, we are to keep on trying. We are to keep on loving God, and following in the footsteps of Jesus as best we can. We won’t get it right all of the time. In fact, we may not get it right most of the time. Getting it right is not the point. It is following the path.

It is like the narrator in Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken.”² We are called to take the road less traveled by. Taking that road means leaving

¹ Matthew 11:30 NRSV

² “The Road Not Taken,” by Robert Frost, from *Mountain Interval*, 1920. Public Domain.

another road untrodden, but taking that road will make all the difference. For following the path of Jesus is to follow the path that leads to light, love, and life. As we walk into the light we find we want to share it with others on the way so that they can pick up their cross of love and join the streaming cloud of witnesses and saints.

The point of the passage is not the burden but the following. One might even say that it is not so much the following as it is the desire to follow. For sometimes we get waylaid, sidetracked, or confused. We may lose our way distracted by a bright flash or tempting bauble. We think we are following and actually we have made a wrong turn. Those wrong turns, especially when we think they are right, can get us awfully lost. But at some point if we are truly trying to follow God and not our own ego we will get back on track.

Thomas Merton may have said it best when he wrote this prayer in his little book, *Thoughts in Solitude*:

“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. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”³

The humility and honesty of that prayer cuts to the heart of the matter. As much as we may think otherwise we really don't know where we are going and we cannot see the road ahead, just as the poet could not. As much as we may meditate and be psychoanalyzed we don't really know who we are. What's more just because we think we are following God doesn't mean we really are. But like old Peter we want to follow God and please God. We trust that our desire to please God is pleasing to God. Regardless of what we do we know that God is with us, and we know that we will not face the difficulties and trials of this life alone.

“My Lord God...I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.... And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always...”

Amen.

³ Thomas Merton. *Thoughts in Solitude*, 19th ed. [New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 1999] p. 79.