

“Finding the Way”

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 and Matthew 7:12-14, 21-29

Ten Vital Verses—Verse #9

Sunday, August 20, 2017

Covenant Presbyterian Church

The first reading from Deuteronomy offers a very clear choice: life or death.

Our vital verse for today from Matthew 7 invites us to think about choices.

The verse is set in the final chapter of a three-chapter collection of the teachings of Jesus, known as the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5-7.

We begin in verse 12 where Jesus offers the so called golden rule about treating others right, and then Jesus offers another clear choice: the easy road that leads to trouble, or the hard road that leads to life. He concludes with other stark contrasts, challenging his followers to put his words into practice, to take what they have learned and live as new people.

Listen for God’s word:

[And Jesus said] “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

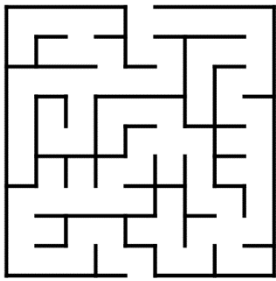
Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

When I was a kid, I used to make mazes. I would get graph paper and a pencil and make something like this.



The more I did these mazes, the more complex and difficult they got, with many wrong turns and dead ends, and only one way out.

I came to enjoy making the maze with many options early, with long paths to dead ends. I wanted to make them very difficult and even frustrating.

The one single narrow path in my difficult mazes led to the finish, to life, and the other paths led to dead ends.

Jesus didn't talk about mazes, but he did use a variety of imagery about finding the way, with gates and pathways. The idea is the same.

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

I think we can agree with Jesus that there are plenty of wrong paths to take in life and that we have to be careful about our choices.

My concern with this verse is that taken too literally, we might think that we are among the few who find God's way and all "those" people out there are lost.

The full message of the gospel tells us that we're all sinners and that God continues to call us and seek us.

I think Jesus may have been using polemical language to get our attention, sort of like when he told us to pluck out our eyes if they cause us to sin. By painting the picture of a stark and simple contrast between the right way and the wrong way, Jesus is helping us to do our best to avoid sin, and to avoid foolish paths. But no matter what, God will continue to love us, call us, and seek us.

One other aspect of this passage which could be problematic: I don't think following Jesus and living as a Christian is making one decision and then coasting.

Finding the path of God's will is a daily task. There are choices we have to make every day—some of them small, some of them profound. Each choice gets us closer or farther from God's will and God's Kingdom.

Every day, we face situations and we must choose how to respond:

We choose what to eat, whether or not we exercise, what to watch if anything on TV

We choose what to do if another car cuts in front of you, or if someone steps in front of you in the supermarket checkout line

We choose how to respond when you have a family gathering and someone starts talking politics, expressing very different views than yours. Maybe that even happens at church....

We choose what to do when you turn on the TV or check the internet right after a big, delicious dinner where you ate too much, and you read about famine in South Sudan, and you remember that your church supports mission work there

We choose how to respond when co-worker or a classmate makes a racially tinged joke, which you don't think is funny, but other people are laughing

We choose how to live in a world with many challenges and difficult situations. You can shake our head in dismay and ignore. You can make snarky comments. Or you can get involved, make a difference, do something.

Finding the way is something we do with our choices every day.

We might be tempted to say to ourselves, "I have chosen God's way, the narrow way. I have joined a church and affirmed Christian faith."

Joining a church, affirming our Christian identity, coming to church on a beautiful Sunday....all good. But that's not enough. We make it real by living our faith, every day.

George Washington expresses the same sentiment to Alexander Hamilton in the hit play "Hamilton"

Winning was easy, governing is harder

At a different point, when Hamilton is eager to get involved in the war, Washington says: "Dying is easy, living is harder."

So finding the way is about the daily choices we make. It's not always clear what we are called to do, but often we are called to do things differently than the people around us, to take what Robert Frost famously called the road less travelled.

One poor choice can make things difficult and it can be hard to find our way back

- Poorly chosen words, with venom and spite
- One fateful encounter with someone who isn't your spouse
- One drink for an alcoholic injection of heroin or some other addictive drug

We used to live in Pittsburgh, a great city. But with all the hills and twists and turns, making a wrong turn is dangerous. If you do make a wrong turn in Pittsburgh, you don't usually just go around the block and find your way back. Instead you end up crossing a bridge or driving into another county.

So when we went to Chicago to see "Hamilton" on Wednesday—which was absolutely fantastic as expected--we were grateful for an easy trip. We drove right to our prepaid parking lot and drove straight home. Yes, there was a little traffic, but it was an easy trip, because we have smart phones, with GPS, global positioning system. The phone tells us exactly where to turn so we can avoid getting lost and stuck on dead ends and find our way home.

Being a Christian is about finding the way and not getting lost.

Brian McLaren has a book (actually any of his books are good) called *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices*. He describes how Christians today are seeking God's will, and yearning for guidance, which they are discovering not in new trendy forms, but in somewhat simple and familiar practices of the Christian faith.

I'd like to mention four tools that we can get better at finding the way. These might be familiar to people who are here regularly, because they are important.

One tool is prayer, and by prayer, I mean asking God to guide us and lead us. I'm a big fan of starting the day with some sort of prayer or connection with God--before we turn on the TV or check our email and get flooded with everything else.

There are many options for morning prayer. One good prayer has been around for a while:

Dear Lord, So far today, I've done all right.
I haven't gossiped, haven't lost my temper,
haven't been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or overindulgent.
I'm really glad about that. Thank you Lord.
But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed.
And from then on, I'm going to need a lot more help.

That prayer is kind of silly, but actually it's not a bad way to start the day.

Another tool is the Bible, with words to comfort us, challenge us, guide us. We have our ten Vital Verses series this summer, but there are a LOT more than 10 vital verses in the Bible.

Psalm 25:4 is a good one: "Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths."

One tool is prayer, another is scripture. A third tool for us to find God's way is Sabbath, the ancient commandment to rest. I'm actually going to say a lot more about Sabbath in a September sermon, but for now as we think about finding our way, I just want to point out how hard it is to make decisions when we're tired. Or maybe think of it this way: how many foolish things do we do

when we're tired? If we want to find God's way, we need to be rested and refreshed.

And the final tool I want to mention today for finding God's way is something I sensed while reading the engaging bestseller *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*, by J.D. Vance. This memoir is the University of Wisconsin "Go Big Read" this year. It tells the story of J.D. Vance, who grew up in rural Appalachia, surrounded by alcohol, drugs, and poverty, with about five father figures. He eventually made it to the Marines, to Ohio State, and to Yale Law School.

There is a lot to unpack in the book about personal and social responsibility, and I don't agree with all of his social analysis, but there is one vital theme running through the book. He wouldn't have survived and gone as far as he has without other people who care and who helped him. He is especially grateful for his grandparents, who despite their issues with alcohol and some very colorful language, show their love for him along the way.

On the second page of the memoir he introduces the theme of help from other people, and the theme runs through the book.

I was one of those kids with a grim future. I almost failed out of high school. I nearly gave in to the deep anger and resentment harbored by everyone around me. Today people look at me, at my job and my Ivy League credentials, and assume that I'm some sort of genius, that only a truly extraordinary person could have made it to where I am today. With all due respect to those people, I think that theory is [baloney]. Whatever talents, I have, I almost squandered until a handful of loving people rescued me.

Life is full of temptation and distraction, full of challenges and obstacles, and full of sadness and hurt. We can get lost in the maze pretty easily. God has given us tools to guide us.

Jesus came to offer us the way life--life that is abundant, eternal, purposeful, and joyful. Together we find the way.

Let us pray.....