

“At the Crossroads”
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Proper 8C, June 26, 2022
1 Kgs 19:15-21, Ps. 16
Gal 5:1, 13-35, Lk 9:51-62

Some decades ago, I had one of those dreams that’s been imprinted on my heart and mind ever since. I realized while working on this sermon that it reminds me of today’s readings, and of my ongoing wrestling with their message.

In the dream, I’m in John’s former Missoula law office, which was on the second and third floors of a beautifully remodeled old funeral home on a shady street at the edge of downtown. The small law firm staff and a few others are having a low-key party in the break area, as sometimes happened on Friday afternoons. Jesus walks in and joins us, which doesn’t seem to be any big deal. He hangs out with us for a while and then subtly begins to beckon one person after another to go with him. Those of us remaining eventually begin to follow along as he takes people around to their new stations in the office. All the women-- who were not the attorneys -- end up in lawyers’ offices and the attorneys all end up at secretaries’ or paralegals’ desks. To the delight of some of us.

I’m up on the third floor talking to a couple of lawyers newly stationed there about how this all might turn out to be a good thing, when I realize that Jesus has given everyone a place to land but me. And so I go look for him. Eventually someone tells me he’s just left but I might be able to catch him. I hurry out to the reception area and look down the broad, steep, red-carpeted staircase and see Jesus near the bottom. I call to him and rush down. I tell him he’s not yet shown me my place and he motions with his head to follow him. We go outside, walk the short distance to the street corner, and pause to look for traffic. After a quick moment, Jesus tells me, “this is your place” and goes on across the street as I stand there stunned.

That’s it. I’m just left standing there, thinking “what the...?! , what am I supposed to do here at this empty crossroad?” As I said, the dream was very real and I’ve been pondering it ever since. Why did Jesus leave me at the street corner? It was clear to me I was to somehow represent Jesus there, or act in his name. But how? My confusion was so intense it was uncomfortable. Plus, the dream sort of confirmed my daughter’s sarcastic teen-aged concern that I was going to turn into a street preacher. Holy moly!

Like many scripture stories, my dream was completely open-ended. Let me explain why I think it resurfaced in relation to today’s readings.

In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus and his disciples are on their way to Jerusalem, where Jesus knows he’s facing death. He sends messengers ahead to let people know he’s coming. The messengers stop in a Samaritan village, but for some reason Jesus is never received there. The text is conspicuously vague about why, saying only that they didn’t receive him because “his face was set toward Jerusalem.” Those words seem to indicate Jesus’s responsibility for what happened and, in fact, Luke generally speaks positively of the Samaritans and their interactions with Jesus.

So it's not likely they rejected him even though there had, indeed, been bad blood between Jews and Samaritans for centuries.

Whatever actually happened, James and John immediately fall back into that ancient bad blood and assume the Samaritans are slighting Jesus. And they want vengeance. Their suggestion to Jesus that they repeat their ancestor Elijah's calling down fire on Samaritans shows how completely they missed the ethical implications of Jesus's transfiguration, which they'd just witnessed. God singled Jesus out from the violent Moses and Elijah and said, "**This** is my Son, my Chosen, listen to **him!**" And God's words had once again fallen on hardened hearts, and so deaf ears.

I'm sure this was one of the many times Jesus said, "What the . . .??!! Will you guys never learn??!!" At any rate, he chastises them for their urge for revenge and tells them just to keep going. To let bygones be bygones.

Down the road we meet three would-be followers of Jesus. The first blithely tells Jesus he'll follow him anywhere. Jesus responds to the man's shallow commitment that it won't be as easy as it seems – that in fact, followers of Jesus have nowhere to rest their heads. On first hearing it might seem like he's just warning the guy "there's no rest for the weary," but given what's just happened in the Samaritan town I think he's saying a lot more.

He's telling this guy -- and his disciples, and us -- that to persevere in following Jesus means we'll no longer really belong to this world we're so very fond of. Jesus understood his mission not as saving souls for heaven some lightyears away, but as re-founding humanity and human culture here on earth, building up what he called the Kingdom of God.

He wasn't going to rain fire down and destroy what humankind had built up; instead he was planting seeds, including the seed of his own person dying into new life, that would fundamentally change things over time. Change things so completely that those who follow the risen Christ no longer fit into the roles and relationships we're used to. Not because those roles and relationships are bad in themselves, but because they've been contaminated by the very thing Jesus had just witnessed in his disciples.

We humans have created a world based on insiders and outsiders – Jews and Samaritans, Blacks and whites. And on might makes right – the ones with the most fire power win – which sadly means death rules human culture. And that simply is not God's way in the world, though it's taken us eons to begin to realize it. Even today we're very tentative in using our human freedom to pursue the peace that surpasses traditional human understanding. Even when we want to follow Jesus to the end, we long for familiar guidelines rather than seeking signs of a new creation. And we definitely don't want to be left at the crossroads to figure things out for ourselves.

Standing at the crossroads between God's ways and our ways, the normal categories no longer apply, not even our self-understood personhood or our way of navigating in the world. Everything becomes new, and the road signs are confusing.

The next two people Jesus meets illustrate how we often turn back to our old ways despite our best intentions. While burying the dead, as the first man wants to do, can genuinely help us grieve, ancient funeral rites were also all tied up in appeasing the gods, and often in getting revenge. Jesus repeatedly tells people to let all that go, to focus on life unfolding and the living God. But sadly, our use of violent death in founding civilization, back with Cain and Abel, has made our whole world into a death-tinged mirage, where we simply can't see the possibility of real life in God until we step outside of our miscreation.

Yet letting go of one's culture means straining or even severing relationships – leaving us at loose ends, and that's a pretty lonely place to be. Sort of like me on the no-status, empty street corner in my dream.

Jesus goes so far as to tell the next guy not even to go home to say good-bye to his living relative, which is pretty harsh! But much in line with other hard sayings of Jesus that remind us that allegiance to family – or tribe or clan or country – is not entirely benign. Our allegiances can easily put us right where James and John jumped to visa vis the Samaritans – us and them, insiders and outsiders, good guys and bad guys.

Jesus also warns us, when he says looking back toward home makes us unfit for the kingdom of God, that the pull to things other than God is so strong that only single-minded purpose and a wholly invested heart will keep us on the heavenly road. Heaven is of course pure glory, but the road through this world to get there includes getting lost and being found; it means dying to self and all we cherish and only eventually rising to new and greater life. We simply have to make our way to and through the crossroads. Which can be disorienting, lonely, and troubling – definitely not a walk in the park! Or even a well-defined, culturally acceptable place in a familiar office.

Even though today's Gospel reading pretty much leaves us at loose ends, we can turn to Paul's reassuring words to the Galatians to renew our hope. Paul describes the freedom of living in the Spirit, as well as some of the pitfalls of living in the flesh. In the Bible living in the flesh means giving into that part of us that remains ruled by the gods of death rather than surrendering ourselves fully to the Spirit of the one true God of Life. So living in the flesh equals living under the sway of death and living in the Spirit means living in the realm of Life in God.

I hope you noticed that only a couple of Paul's signs of living in the flesh have anything to do with sexuality – fornication and licentiousness -- and they are really about indulging our sexuality without loving our neighbors as ourselves. The other works of the flesh also have to do with not loving our neighbors as ourselves. Jealousy, anger, quarrels, factions or things that often lead to strife, like drunkenness and carousing. Or the worship of false gods that support those self-centered behaviors.

It's telling that Paul speaks of the fruit of the Spirit in the singular, even though he delineates nine dimensions of that fruit. It's sort of like a threefold trinity – nine personal qualities united by and in one godly Spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Aahh! It enlivens me just to list all those ways of loving one's neighbor and oneself. And like the word "love" these fruits are all action words. They're ways of sharing our holy being in our everyday doing.

I've always been a big believer in the maxim taught in twelve-step groups – fake it until you make it. In fact, I think "fake it until you make it" is a good description of spiritual practice. And a wonderful way to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit.

There's an ancient Christian prayer tradition called the Novena, where for nine days you repeat a particular prayer or devotion. A contemporary version of a Novena is to practice -- to pray and to play with – each of the qualities of the fruit of the Spirit, one a day for nine days. Focus on love the first day, then joy the next, then peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, day by day. And then do it again, and again. Sometimes it will likely feel awkward or contrived, maybe even hopeless. But practice makes perfect -- which comes from the word "complete." Practice brings completeness or fulfillment. Practice bears fruit.

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are the fruit of faithfully following Jesus, as well as the antidotes to the discouragement or loneliness that can arise as we seek to surrender our lives to God and go by a new and unfamiliar Way. And truly, where better to encounter, and to practice them, than at the crossroads? At the capital-C Cross road and at the ordinary street corners we pass through every day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.