



UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

“The Road Less Taken,”
a sermon given by the Rev. Frank Clarkson
on April 3, 2011

If you found this morning’s reading¹ hard to hear, I hope you know you’re not alone. The disciples were often troubled or disappointed by what Jesus said. So if the reading made you squirm, I ask you to hang in there for a few minutes, because there is some wisdom in this passage if we will work to find it.

I bet most of you know the poem by Robert Frost, “The Road Not Taken”:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;

The scene that Frost describes--standing at a fork in the road--that’s how I imagine this passage from Mark. Jesus and his friends have been walking around the country, teaching and preaching. That’s what itinerant ministers do. They’re out in the boonies--the farthest they ever get from Jerusalem, where the temple is, where the power is. It’s at this moment in the story that they start to head back there.

My question is, “Why? Why go back to Jerusalem?” I imagine the disciples asking the same thing: “Why not stay out here in the country where the common people are, where there’s good work to be done? Why go to Jerusalem, ‘the city that kills its prophets,’ where the Romans are in charge and the religious leaders see you as a threat?”

These days in Lent, with Easter still a few weeks away, are a good time to contemplate the difficult journey Jesus and his friends make, the journey that will lead to betrayal, suffering and death.

¹ Mark 8:27-35.

Walking down that dusty road, Jesus asks his friends, “Who do you say that I am?” and Peter responds, “You are the messiah.” In effect Peter says, “You are the one we’ve been waiting for.” The Jewish people had been waiting for the return of a new King David who would lead them and restore them to their former glory. Those who followed Jesus hoped that he was that new king.

But Jesus says he is not who they think he is. He says that the road they are on is one that will lead to suffering and death. The text says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

You should know that Jesus probably never said those words. There’s a group of scholars called the Jesus Seminar, whose goal is to figure out whether the words and deeds attributed to Jesus were ever really said or done by him. They created quite a stir when they shared their finding that 82 percent of what’s attributed to Jesus in the gospels probably wasn’t really said by him. They believe that the early church, trying to make their case in a hostile environment, put those words in Jesus’ mouth.²

“Take up your cross” is one example. Jesus didn’t know he was going to be killed by crucifixion, so it’s highly unlikely he would have used this expression. It makes more sense that the early Christians, trying to explain why Jesus was killed, decided it was all part of God’s plan, and fleshed out the story to support this theory.

I understand how this can happen. It’s in our nature to seek explanation for things we don’t understand, especially things that trouble us. Just recently I heard someone say, “Everything happens for a reason.” You hear this all the time, but I don’t believe it. It implies there is a purpose, a plan to everything, and I don’t buy it. Because if there was a plan, then that would mean that a young person dying of cancer and the terrible earthquake in Japan happened for a reason. I don’t believe in a God that sends suffering to test us, or a God that makes natural disasters and disease part of a plan. Good things can come out of bad situations, but that doesn’t mean those bad things were supposed to happen. Sometimes my theology boils down to this: “Stuff happens.” Then the question is, how do we respond--from a place of love or fear?

The early Christians, needing to explain the death of Jesus, decided it had to be part of God’s plan. But what kind of God requires suffering and blood sacrifice? In the book of the prophet Isaiah, God says, “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free?” (Isaiah 58:6)

Jesus was part of that prophetic tradition--standing on the side of love and justice, caring so much about others, especially those at the margins, that he was willing to give up his own life rather than go along with the oppressors. He went to Jerusalem to challenge them, to speak truth to power, and they killed him for it.

That is why his life compels and challenges me. Because I know my own tendency not to rock the boat, not to speak up or stand up at times when I could be an ally to those in need. I often seek my own comfort, and I suspect you do too. But there are times when we need to stick our

² See Robert W. Funk, *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?*

necks out, and head into those places that are uncomfortable and scary even. Jesus may have never said those words “take up your cross,” but he did walk that road to Jerusalem. He was willing to give up his life rather than betray his ideals or his friends.

Let me tell you a story. It's one that Parker Palmer, the Quaker writer and educator, shares from when he went on an Outward Bound course. He was in his early forties, facing some challenges in his life, and thought this might shake things up. A few days in, he faced the challenge he feared most, rappelling off a cliff over a hundred feet high. With his instructor's guidance he got up his courage, and backed over the edge, but then slammed into a rock face, just four feet down. The instructor looked down at him and said, “I don't think you've quite got it.”

It took some coaxing, but Palmer came to see that he needed to do what was counter-intuitive: lean back and away from the security of the rock wall and push out into space. He did this, and began moving down the rock face, his confidence growing. But halfway down, the instructor on the ground yelled up to him, “Parker, I think you better stop and see what's just below your feet.” It was a deep hole in the face of the rock. Here's how he tells it:

“In order to get down, I would have to get around that hole, which meant I could not maintain the straight line of descent I had started to get comfortable with. I would need to change course and swing myself around that hole, to the left or to the right. I knew for a certainty that attempting to do so would lead directly to my death—so I froze, paralyzed with fear.

“The second instructor let me hang there, trembling, in silence for what seemed like a very long time. Finally, she shouted up these helpful words: ‘Parker, is anything wrong?’

“To this day, I do not know where my words came from, though I have twelve witnesses to the fact that I spoke them. In a high, squeaky voice I said, ‘I don't want to talk about it.’

“‘Then,’ said the second instructor, ‘it's time that you learned the Outward Bound motto.’

“‘Oh, keen’, I thought. ‘I'm about to die, and she's going to give me a motto!’ But then she shouted ten words I hope never to forget, words whose impact and meaning I can still feel: ‘If you can't get out of it, get into it!’”

Parker Palmer says, “I had long believed in the concept of ‘the word become flesh’ but until that moment I had not experienced it. My teacher spoke words so compelling that they bypassed my mind, went into my flesh, and animated my legs and feet. No helicopter would come to rescue me; the instructor on the cliff would not pull me up with the rope; there was no parachute in my backpack to float me to the ground. There was no way out of my dilemma except to get into it—so my feet started to move and in a few minutes I made it safely down.”³

Why would any of us choose a path marked “Dangerous Road Ahead”? Our culture, and our human nature, tell us to avoid it. We're taught to heed those signs that say, “Turn Back Now!”

³ Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*. This story can be found online at <http://www.couragerenewal.org/parker/writings/leading-from-within>

We're encouraged to seek comfort and security, to avoid risks, to take the wide and safe road--even if it's not the most scenic route.

But take a look at the words from Rainer Maria Rilke at the top of the order of service. "Don't you think the seed would find it easier to stay in the ground? Don't migrating birds have it hard, and the wild animals who have to fend for themselves? ...Life itself is what's hard. And you want to live, don't you?"

What Rilke reminds us is that to seek only what is comfortable is to shrink back from life. It may be part of our human nature to do this, but we do it at our own peril. And this living in fear, this avoidance of suffering can bring its own kind of pain. "You can hold yourself back from the sufferings of the world," Franz Kafka said "that is something you are free to do and it accords with your nature, but perhaps this very holding back is the one suffering you could avoid."

You can try to hold back from the sufferings of this world. But this holding back is its own kind of suffering. And you know, don't you, that life isn't safe? You know that life is hard. And you want to live, and feel alive, don't you?

I think I've told you about when I started a summer of hospital chaplaincy training, and how I was afraid. I confessed this to my peers, that it felt like entering a dark tunnel, all the suffering and despair I would encounter there. One of the supervisors, a wise woman, said, "Yes, you will experience plenty of pain and sorrow on this path. But I promise, you will find companions on the way."

If you can't get out if it, get into it. I encourage you, this week, to take a risk: do one thing that makes you nervous. I'm not talking about a foolish or unnecessary risk--I'm not saying go out and drive too fast or stop taking your medication or start building a nuclear reactor in your basement. I'm saying take a risk for love or for justice, tell the truth that you've been longing to speak, stand up for yourself or for someone in need, face something that you fear.

It's a paradox: seeking to save our lives, seeking protection from pain, wanting control and security when those things are not available, that is how we lose our way; how we lose this life we have been given. But if you give up the illusion that life is supposed to be easy, if you live for something larger than yourself, if you choose that road less taken, with all its risks and perils, that is the way to find your life, and save it.

Life is hard. But that's not the whole story. Life is hard, and it offers moments of grace and beauty and blessing. You want to live, don't you? Then don't hide from the perils of life--face them and head toward them. I promise, if you do this, you will find your life, and you will have companions on the way. It will be hard, it will be good, and it will be enough.

Amen.