

MEDITATIONS FROM ORIOLE-YORK MILLS UNITED CHURCH



Our Fork In The Road

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This is one in a series of selected sermons and resources from Oriole – York Mills United Church. It is offered as a public service in the spirit of sharing and strengthening our Christian faith. We hope readers benefit from the insights they provide.

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Our Fork in the Road

Mark 8:31-38

We have heard the saying before. We will no doubt hear it again -- that famous and quirky statement by Yogi Berra: "If you come to a fork in the road, take it." We wonder what it means. I know I do almost every time I hear it!

When we come to a fork in the road, we usually have two options – to go this way or that way. In our Scripture this morning, both Jesus and his followers have come to a fork in the road. For Jesus, it is actually *another* fork in the road where he has a decision to make. You might recall Jesus' first encounter with Satan in the wilderness. This happened at the beginning of his public ministry and immediately after he was baptized by his cousin John the Baptist. We need to read that event in Matthew 4 and Luke 4 to catch the full flavour of this fork in the road for Jesus. Mark condenses the wilderness temptation experience of Jesus into two verses: "The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him" (1:12, 13).

You might recognize this first fork as the temptation encounter between Jesus and Satan. Jesus was *tempted* by Satan to accomplish his life's purpose in ways other than God's way. (Isn't that also what coming to a fork might mean in our lives? We are confronted with a decision – to go this way or that way or even to take another third path.) When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness, Satan offered him several paths to take that



Temptation of Jesus, Botticelli circa 1482

After his baptism Jesus spends 40 days in the wilderness, fasting. The devil asks him to turn stone into bread, thereby proving that he is the son of God. Jesus refuses: *But he answered and said: It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'*

sounded much easier than the journey he was about to make. In each instance, Jesus had to decide what he would do. And at the end of that first encounter, *The Message Bible* states: “The Devil retreated temporarily, lying in wait for another opportunity.” Well, I think Satan has found another opportunity.

For the disciples of Jesus, their response to the fork in the road was intimately connected to what Jesus would do. But their

initial response to the fork in the road was different from Jesus' decision. Jesus was clear about what he needed to do and where he *must* go. But his followers were not at all sure of Jesus' direction. They had other ideas about what Jesus should do that certainly did not include going down a path of suffering, rejection and death. They really did want to follow Jesus *but* (there often seems to be a "but," doesn't there?) they had their own ideas about following him. They wanted a *say – a voice* -- in the path Jesus took. They clearly did not like what Jesus was teaching them here in Caesarea Philippi. And they wanted him to know how they felt about it.

To understand this more fully, we need to remember the conversation Jesus had just finished with Peter and the other disciples. "Tell me," Jesus asked, "who do *people* say I am? Who do *you* say I am?" Peter gave an answer that was both right and wrong. It was right because he correctly identified Jesus as God's Son, the Messiah sent to save the world. But it was wrong because Peter's idea of the Messiah was incorrect. Peter thought the Messiah, or the Christ, would be an earthly king with political clout. The disciples wanted to follow Jesus but they were hoping the path would lead to a throne in a palace on Earth. They believed their redemption meant freedom from the Roman occupation forces. And this liberation would literally come through the Messiah whom they believed was the man Jesus they were following.

With this idea running through their minds, it was confusing for them to hear Jesus say that he would soon be rejected, scorned and killed. I doubt they even heard him also say that, after three days, he would rise again from the dead. The unexpectedness of

this prediction of Jesus' suffering and death sent the disciples into such a panic that their hearts and minds rebelled against what Jesus was saying. Since Peter had been the one to identify Jesus as the Messiah, he would naturally be the one to talk to Jesus.

We are not told what Peter said to Jesus, but I can imagine he put his arm around Jesus' shoulder as he drew him aside and then began to wave a finger in Jesus' face. Maybe he shook his head and as much as said: "Listen, Jesus, when I said 'Messiah,' this is not what I meant! Being the Messiah has nothing to do with failure, suffering and death! It's about being the king -- about having success and power and sovereignty. So let's have no more of this talk about suffering and death. Stick with us, Jesus -- *we'll show you the way!*" Well, verse 33 says Jesus rebuked Peter harshly. But did you notice one little detail? Before he told Peter how wrong he was, Jesus first turned around and looked right at the other disciples.

Why did he do that? What did he see when he looked at them? He might have seen approval in their eyes for what Peter had just said. They did agree with Peter of course. All this nonsense about suffering, rejection and death was no way to talk. But for a fleeting moment, did Jesus see something else? Did he remember his encounter with Satan in the wilderness and being tempted to go in a direction that did *not* include the way of suffering he knew he must go? Was Jesus tempted to see in this band of disciples the *possibility* of going another way? Think about it: Jesus had something going here. He had attracted quite a following of people who liked to listen to him teaching. His ministry had become very popular. He had healed many people

of all their various illnesses and diseases. He had fed over 4,000 people just a little while earlier. And 5,000 before that! Was that the way to continue his journey and accomplish God's purposes?

When Jesus started out in his ministry, he wouldn't have filled even a modest synagogue, but, now . . . well, Jesus looked for all the world like a man who was going places. When Jesus asked in verse 27 "Who do people say that I am?" he needed to ask that question because, at this turning point in his ministry, he had to focus his disciples' attention on the main mission of his life.

But, suppose, after hearing Peter's rebuke, Jesus turned and looked back at his eager disciples and saw a fork in his road again. Another temptation to take the easier route -- to go Peter's way instead of God's way after all. For God's route was no easier for Jesus than it would be for anyone else.

Isn't it often true that, when we feel tempted by something, we give it a second look? We are sitting in a restaurant and the waiter comes by with the dessert tray. We glanced at that piece of baklava cheesecake but initially decided to resist the temptation. "Are you sure?" the waiter asks, even as he moves the tray just a little closer in our direction. And so we give it another look. If we yield to temptation at all, it usually comes not after the first glance but after the second.



“Go Away from Me, Satan” James Tissot circa 1886

Peter told Jesus there was another way to go that would not involve the rejection, suffering and death he was talking about. I wonder if Jesus might have considered Peter’s way if only for a moment. He looked at the disciples as a kind of second glance. Peter had rebuked his Master and pointed to that other path that led *to* power and *away* from the Cross. And Jesus glanced over at the other disciples almost as though he were considering Peter's proposal. It was very tempting. But Jesus recognized temptation for what it is – and the source of that temptation -- because he had heard it before. Jesus knew the truth and again told Satan, the unseen tempter, to get behind him. Those thoughts were not from God. That way was not God’s way.

If you are like me, there are more days than I care to admit when it is difficult to be a follower, especially of Jesus -- choosing to do things his way rather than following the success models and politically acceptable ways of society today. It is tough because, somewhere in the recesses of our hearts and minds, there is often a desire to be a successful leader. I searched the Chapters bookstore website last week for a list of books currently in print on being a leader and exercising leadership. The search engine coughed up a massive list of more than 15,000 books that teach about how to be an effective leader. Then I searched for books that had something to do with "following." A mere 500-plus titles showed up on my computer screen. And do you know what most of those books are about? They give advice on how to follow your dreams. And do you know what many people dream about? About becoming a successful leader of people who are happy to follow their lead!

It is one thing to follow an inspiring leader who promises the road is leading somewhere obviously good. It is quite another thing to fall in line with a leader whose promise includes going down a very, very difficult path. Not too many are into choosing suffering, pain, rejection and death. However, that was the fork in the road Jesus' disciples encountered. They surely wanted to follow Jesus. But his path was going in the opposite direction to where they expected – and wanted -- to go.

At this critical point in Jesus' life and ministry, he invited the crowd to join the disciples and listen to him. That invitation includes us as followers of Jesus today. But what Jesus told them (and us) in verses 34-38 was not the kind of thing that engenders a lot of enthusiasm. Quite the opposite: Jesus spoke

about bearing a cross, about losing your life and about turning away from what the world values in order to embrace a path that would involve sacrifice, hard work and also death.

To follow Jesus still involves this kind of choice as we stand at the fork in the road on our journey of faith. It seems there are two ways to get behind Jesus: we can get behind Jesus as a kind of Satan, clutching tightly to our self-interest and self-serving ease. Or we can follow Jesus as a cross-bearing disciple – putting his ways first.

During Lent we are reminded that the whole of the Christian life is an encounter with a fork in the road. We are constantly being enticed down various paths that promise all kinds of good or seemingly good things. And for anyone with enough ambition, willpower and sheer determination, they are there for the getting. But acquiring the world's treasures may require more than we imagine: family time may get sacrificed, involvement in church life may become only when convenient, community support or service may get cut back, problem areas in a relationship may go unattended because we don't have time for everything. But life is all about making choices. And in this passage, Jesus faced his disciples and all who may have been casually or curiously following him with the importance and the cost of their decision to follow him and what it could mean for their lives.

In Lent we also ponder the choice Jesus made when he came to the fork in his road. In the ears of most people then and now, Peter's suggestion that Jesus steer clear of sacrifice and suffering and death would make eminent sense. But we know

what Jesus chose instead. He chose God's way. He chose the way of suffering. And he chose it for us. So if we want to follow Jesus as a disciple, then as Jesus said, we need to be intentional about travelling the path he marks out for us. Are we, in fact?

Do we, I wonder, give much more thought to our spring break or travel plans than we ever devote to contemplating what our Lenten journey toward the Cross means? We would do well to ponder what it means to be a people who live under the sign of the cross. And we would do well to ponder what it means to "bear our cross" too. It is not about coping with the many "burdens in life." Jesus spoke of his followers being prepared to put him and his way first in their lives, whatever the cost.

So the gospel message for us this morning is the same as every Sunday morning – and, really, for every day of the week. It is Jesus' challenge to us: If you come to a cross in the road, take it.

May this be so for you and for me.

Rev. Chris Miller
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