

“The Road Less Traveled”

Mark 8:31-38

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
Stone Mountain, Georgia
March 8, 2009

Baseball legend, Yogi Berra, has more entries in *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* than any other sports figure. His one-of-a-kind observations about life have frequently made people wince and laugh. Some of his most unforgettable one-liners are: “It ain’t over ‘till it’s over;” “Never answer an anonymous letter;” “I didn’t really say everything I said;” “If the people don’t want to come out to the ballpark, no one can stop them;” “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” That last one is one of my favorites.

In today’s text, Jesus has come to a fork in the road. He must decide to stay in the safe and friendly confines of Galilee or head south to Jerusalem where he would face his enemies who wanted to silence him. Which road would he take?

“Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this openly” Mark 8:31-32a. He headed south, didn’t he, into the eye of the storm.

I wonder how difficult this decision was. I want to believe that he preferred staying in safe, friendly Galilee surrounded by family, friends and adoring crowds than moving on to Jerusalem. **Why didn’t he?**

Avoiding Jerusalem would have undermined his purpose and mission in life. He was not driven by the desire for an easy life, but a meaningful one.

For him, this meant confronting evil, especially the oppressive religious leaders in Jerusalem that had grown greedy and corrupt. It meant becoming an advocate for the powerless and reaching out to the disenfranchised by giving them hope and helping them with their struggles.

The pursuit of justice was more important to him than self-preservation. Being faithful to his calling would not allow him to stay in Galilee, as enticing as this must have been.

Psychiatrist and best selling author, Scott Peck, refers to a journey of this nature as “the road less traveled.” You recognize this as the title of his best known work. “Life is difficult!” he writes in the opening paragraph, and he encourages his readers to travel down some challenging roads in order to live up to their potential and make a difference in this world.

What road less traveled are you avoiding? What do you need to do in order to be a better mate, parent, child, student, employee, employer, neighbor, citizen or witness for Christ? Who needs you to hear their pleas for help and put your faith into action? I hope, with God’s help, that you will follow Jesus’ example and make that journey. Take the first step today.

Don’t be surprised, however, if others try to talk you out of traveling down this road of personal renewal and social consciousness. Our text says that Peter pulled Jesus aside and rebuked him. I’m not surprised, based upon Peter’s impulsive personality. Why did Peter do this, though?

I have no doubt he loved Jesus and did not want him to suffer. I also believe that Peter, unlike Jesus, was operating out of fear instead of perfect love, which casts out fear. In addition, I think Peter was so hopeful and excited about Jesus restoring Israel to its former glory that he could not handle this level of disappointment.

Don’t you get the feeling that since Peter identified Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, in the previous passage, he thinks he knows what this means? I do and yet nothing could have been farther from the truth. It wasn’t until after the resurrection that he had any idea what it really meant for Jesus to be the Christ. At this point, all Peter knew was that there was no place for a cross in his faith. He wanted no part of a Messiah who would be a suffering servant. This meant

that he, too, as a faithful disciple, would be rejected, suffer and die. It seems clear that Peter was trying to protect himself as much as Jesus. However, for Jesus, there was no room in faith for negotiating in the shadows.

Why did Jesus go to Jerusalem over Peter's objections? It appears that he was looking at life from God's perspective and Peter was not. "Turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus replied, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on **divine things** but on **human things**' " Mark 8:33.

It is obvious that Jesus' heart was set on pleasing God and making life better for those that were struggling under the weight of misguided power. This, for Jesus, was more important than satisfying his own comforts and desires or even saving his life.

Each time I read this passage, I marvel at Jesus' clarity of purpose, confidence in God's claim upon his life and level of commitment to that call. I wonder who modeled this kind of radical faith for him. Was it Abraham, the prophets or maybe Mary and Joseph?

Who modeled this radical faith for you? Who taught you what it meant to follow Jesus and love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? Who needs you to model this kind of authentic faith for them?

Discerning God's will is not always easy, but it is necessary when trying to decide which road to travel. Do your best to look at life from God's perspective and make your decision based upon what He wants you to do.

When you discern His will, embrace it with the same passion Jesus did. Don't do as Peter and negotiate with Jesus in private to lower your level of commitment. From this text, I see no room in our faith for negotiating in the shadows.

I have read that many of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s closest aides tried to dissuade him from going to Memphis on March 29, 1968, because it was too dangerous. His plane was even delayed because of a bomb scare. He refused to stay home where he was surrounded by family and supporters because the sanitation workers needed him to bring their plight to the nation's attention. Six days later he was assassinated.

This is a level of commitment to doing God's will that few attain. I know that. However, I believe that Dr. King's example can inspire all of us to be more passionate about being the presence of Christ in a broken world, whatever the cost.

Let me tell you something that you can do that will help you to be more committed to doing God's will. Include others on your journey. Accept invitations to join others on their journey and invite those you meet to join you. If your mission is to make the world better, you need others' help and they need what you have to offer, which is a purpose for living that will truly be meaningful, fulfilling and rewarding. I believe Jesus modeled this in our text.

His invitation could not have been more inclusive. Everyone was invited to join him on his journey. "If **any** want to be my followers," Jesus said.

However, the invitation could not have been more challenging, either. "If any want to become my followers, let them **deny** themselves and **take up their cross** and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake and for the gospel will save it." Mark 8:34-35.

Discipleship was offered to anyone that wanted to make life more about giving than getting, loving than hating, setting people free than oppressing them, telling the truth than deceiving others, pursuing justice than seeking favoritism, accepting others than controlling them, forgiving than seeking revenge, and being peacemakers than hurting people. For sure, this was a stiff challenge, but one worthy of pursuing because of the difference it would enable believers to make in the world.

I appreciate the example of building community that Jesus left us. We must not travel alone on our spiritual journey. We need to accept invitations from our Lord and others to travel with them and we need to invite others along our way to join us. This sense of community is empowering.

Perhaps the first step you need to make this morning is to accept Jesus' invitation to follow him. Will you do that? By faith, will you open your heart and life to him?

Will you also accept our invitation to join us on our journey at Smoke Rise? Here you will find fellow pilgrims that will encourage and pray for you as we work together to respond to the needs of a hurting world. Your companionship will make our common journey more fulfilling and rewarding. Come travel with us.