

Which Way Should I Go?

Psalm 1; John 17:6-19

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Lewis Carroll has Alice ask the Cheshire Cat this question, “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”

The Cat responds, “That depends a good deal on where you want to get to.”

“I don’t much care where,” Alice says.

The Cat wisely advises, “Then it doesn’t matter which way you go.”

An important truth is embedded in that little exchange. We cannot pick a road to somewhere unless we know where we are going. We can’t get “there” when we don’t know where “there” is.

I was at the HudsonAlpha Spring Benefit a couple of weeks ago. They were celebrating their ten-year anniversary. I was amazed by all that HudsonAlpha Institute for Biotechnology has accomplished in just ten years. They have become a world leader in genomic research. Right here in Huntsville, Alabama! Neil Lamb told us when he was here recently that we are on the cusp of cancer becoming something we live with not die from. Somebody told him to hurry! HudsonAlpha did not get “there” by not knowing where “there” is.

The same is true for Highlands Bar and Grill in Birmingham. Did you see that they were honored last week as the most outstanding restaurant in America at the 2018 James Beard Foundation Awards? Not the most outstanding restaurant in Birmingham. Or Alabama. In America. Think of all the restaurants in New York City, Boston, Miami, New Orleans, and other large culinary cities. Highlands did not get “there” by not knowing where “there” is.

Now let's make this personal. To paraphrase the Cheshire Cat, where do you want to get to? In your career. Your marriage. In your life. Which way should you go? At some point, we all have to grapple with these questions. Where do we want to go in life? What do we want to do? Who do we want to be? They are questions the great religious traditions have urged us to ask and answer. For example, the book of Proverbs was an instruction manual for Jewish adolescents. Here's what they taught their youth:

*Trust in the Lord with all your
heart,
and do not rely on your own
insight.
In all your ways acknowledge
him,
and he will make straight your
paths.*

The Buddha taught, "There are only two mistakes one can make along the road to truth: not going all the way, and not starting."

Muhammad taught his followers, "Richness is not having many belongings, but richness is contentment of the soul."

And our own Lord, from the Sermon on the Mount, "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

Which way should we go? What do we want to do? Who do we want to be? They are the great questions of life, and they are addressed by the great religious traditions. We see an excellent example in Psalm 1, the beautiful psalm I read earlier. It contrasts two ways of living, two destinations in life. One is called the "blessed" way, and the other is called the "wicked" way. The ancient Hebrews were right, I believe, in teaching that we all have a choice to make, a choice between two fundamentally different ways of life.

Let's begin with the blessed life. With this caveat. I prefer to use the older translation here. The New Revised Standard Version, which I

normally read on Sunday mornings, uses the word “happy” rather than blessed. It reads, “Happy are those who...” I much prefer the word “blessed.” Blessedness is more substantial than happiness. Happiness is fleeting, like the Happy Meal at McDonald’s. Our children are happy as long as they get the Happy Meal and the little toy inside. Take the little toy away, though, and suddenly they’re not so happy. Happiness is superficial; it’s fickle. Blessedness, on the other hand, runs deeply and is not built on trinkets and other pleasurable circumstances.

So here’s the fundamental teaching of this psalm: if you want to have a blessed life, you’ve got to follow the path that takes you there.

The writer then uses three strong verbs to describe this way: walk, stand, and sit. They are body positions, aren’t they? A body can walk, it can stand, and it can sit. It is a physical description of how the blessed person positions herself in life. The blessed person does not walk in the counsel of the wicked. She does not stand in the way of sinners. She does not sit in the seat of scoffers. To the contrary, she delights in the teaching of God and meditates on it day and night. The writer says that this person is like a tree planted beside streams of water. The roots sink deeply taking up moisture from the stream of water. The tree then grows, produces fruit, and is healthy.

Psalm 1 is saying that if you want to get “there,” a road exists to take you there. If you want to have a blessed life, you must select that road. It has to do with the way you walk, stand, and sit. It has to do with being teachable, listening to the ancient wisdom of faith traditions, taking delight in God’s instruction. If you want to be a healthy, productive tree, choose that way of life. Choose your destination, and then pick the road that’s going to take you there.

There is another way, of course. It is called the way of the wicked. It is much different. The wicked are compared to “chaff,” a powdery waste produced when a farmer would winnow his crops. A farmer would take a pitchfork and toss the seed into the air. The wind would catch the chaff, small pieces of seed husks, stems or leaves, and blow it away. The heavier seed would fall to the ground and then would be easily gathered.

Compare the instability and uselessness of the chaff to a tree planted beside streams of water. The wicked will not stand in the judgment, he says. Some interpret this to mean that the wicked will have no influence in important matters of the community. When people gather to determine matters of “judgment,” the wicked will have no voice. Their way, he says, ultimately will perish.

So which way should I go? It all depends on where you want to get to, doesn't it?

One of our members called the church office this past week saying that she desperately needed to talk with a minister. I took her call. She explained that she had to make a very important decision in just a matter of minutes. She's a volunteer tutor in a public school. The day before one of her students stole her wallet. The resource officer pulled up a videotape from the room, and it clearly showed that the child stole the wallet. No doubt. The child is twelve years old. Our member was trying to decide what to do. The school was urging her to press charges. Apparently the child has a history of this kind of behavior. Our member wanted to be redemptive in this child's life, not punitive. Remember she's twelve. What could turn this child around? What would be the best thing for the child? It was a very hard decision, and I think our member did the right thing. She chose to have the child held accountable for her behavior and insisted that she get proper counseling.

Here's what I hope for that child. I hope someone will gently take her little face in their hands, look her in the eyes, and say, “Dear, you are a child of God, loved beyond measure. Where do you to go in life? What's your destination? To get ‘there,’ you've got to get on the path that takes you ‘there.’”

We all do. It is the teaching of the great religious traditions. In our careers. In our marriages. In our life. We must decide where we want to get to. Then we must pick the road that will take us there.

Closing Prayer

Give us wisdom, Lord, wisdom from our faith, to know which way we should go. Amen.