

“The Road Less Traveled”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
First Sunday of Lent, March 10, 2019
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Scriptures: Luke 9: 51-56; “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost

Luke 9:51-56 (NRSV)

⁵¹ When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him; ⁵³ but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” ⁵⁵ But he turned and rebuked them. ⁵⁶ Then^[a] they went on to another village.

Footnote:

Luke 9:56 Other ancient authorities read *rebuked them, and said, “You do not know what spirit you are of, ⁵⁶ for the Son of Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them.”*

“The Road Not Taken” By: Robert Frost

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;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Sermon

Don Middour and his siblings were raised near here
in the Great Depression years.

The poverty and scarcity of their era
made a lasting impression, shaping them, making them grateful.

Don grew up on Rocky Ford Road, taking a street car to school,
and observed life on both sides of the street car windows.

As the street car passed along urban avenues,
young Don made a conscious choice,

He decided he would be grateful; he would be grateful for everything.

"To be gracious, you must first be grateful." --Fred Craddock

Gratitude infused his every fiber, and it showed.

Don never had a cross word to say about anyone, never raised his voice,
always had a smile for you and me,
always made you feel like you wanted to be in his presence.

Raised in an era of depression and abject poverty,
he claimed an attitude of gratitude, and it showed.

Don met a young woman named Carolyn
when he was a student at Georgia Tech
and she was a student at Agnes Scott College.

(Isn't that how it is supposed to happen?)

One of their early dates was to attend a poetry reading at Agnes Scott
by a visiting professor from Amherst College named Robert Frost.

Hold that thought.

We'll return to one of the United States' Poet Laurette.

Let's keep our focus on our beloved.

Don and Carolyn were the first couple to be married here,
in the brand-new sanctuary of First Christian Church of Decatur,
68 years ago on March 17, 1951.

After the wedding they headed south to Florida for their honeymoon.

They were so broke when driving back to Atlanta
that they lived on bread and bologna...and love.

Ah, love.

They shared – and will always share – a love that touched countless hearts and souls;

a love that kept them close through thick and thin;

a love that kept them sitting side by side and holding hands;

a love born of mutual respect and affection;

a circle of love in which the giving, receiving, sharing
knows no endings, only beginnings.

Even though they are no longer alive in this realm,
the legacy of their love lives on.

Last December and two Decembers before that
the Baby Jesus in our Christmas Pageant was delightfully played
by their great-grandson and great-granddaughter, respectively.

Now, returning to their encounter with Robert Frost.

Chances are pretty good that when Don and Carolyn listened
to Robert Frost read his poetry, they heard him recite his classics,
such as *Mending Walls*, *Birches*, and *The Road Not Taken*.

“In 1935, Robert Frost made his first visit [here] to Agnes Scott College
[and the City of Decatur]
to visit his friend and the college’s president at the time, Wallace Alston.

Frost clearly enjoyed his visit,
returning in 1940 and 1945,
and then visiting every year on his way to a vacation in Miami
until his death in 1963.

[Clearly even before the building of the Hartsfield-Jackson Airport,
if you wanted to get anywhere at all, you had to go through Atlanta.]

Unlike the stand alone lectures typical at many colleges even today,
Frost’s visits [to Decatur and Agnes Scott College] lasted days,
and often included several opportunities for students and faculty
to interact with the poet.

His literary partnership with the college
sparked an Agnes Scott College tradition
of not only appreciating literature but of also finding new ways
to experience, discuss and create literature as well.”
--*Agnes Scott College Website, 2019.*

Consider, for example, Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken.”
He speaks to the hearts and minds of folks
who have heard callings and chosen careers,
pursued professions and lived into vocations
that may be more service-oriented, placing people before profit,
whose rewards may be more heavenly than monetary.

“The Road Not Taken” speaks as well to souls who glance back and reflect,
wondering what might have been,
what life today be like had we chosen a different path,

taken another way at a certain intersection,
taken a risk way back when the crossroad beckoned.
Influences, pressures, hesitations, financial realities,
gumption and guts, personal vainglory, and God's grace
all play a part in the choice folks make of which road to take.

Frost speaks to the pains and frustrations of the millions of our brothers and sisters
who sense they never had such a luxury, the luxury of choice.

There are so many of us around the world
whose socioeconomic surroundings and social circumstances
offer no such thing as a choice,
whose options are far more limited and limiting.

I like to believe, to think, to hope that one of the key reasons
we are present in this sacred space
is that we care deeply about every one of God's creations,
that we share a common call and commission from Christ
to build a beloved community in which everyone
– everyone from the streets of Decatur to the White Cliffs of Dover,
from Atlanta to Australia,
from Georgia to Johannesburg –
a beloved community in which every woman, man, and child
has the opportunity to make a choice at crossroads,
to decide for himself or herself to select a pathway,
that everyone has the right to self-determination.

We get this idea, this sense of purpose, this courage to dare to love, from the Divine,
even though it cost Christ everything,
and in the end paying the cost became the gateway to life everlasting.

That is one of the reasons I am a follower of Jesus Christ.
Maybe this is one of the reasons for you, as well.

Jesus of Nazareth made a choice at a crossroads,
and He took the road less traveled.

"When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem."

On His spiritual pilgrimage, He set his face to Jerusalem and the Cross that awaited.

A new time had begun.

The days drew near for him to be taken up.

Now was the time to claim His priestly role as savior.

A new purpose was declared.

He set his face to go to Jerusalem.

To go to the Temple.

To claim his inheritance as the Son of God.

To bear the Cross.

To trust in God's mercy and power to restore, redeem, resurrect.

Jesus sent disciples on ahead of him,

to prepare the way along the road,

to make arrangements in villages and hamlets.

He was met with resistance in a village on the way.

*"On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to make ready for him;
but they did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem."*

They wanted nothing to do with anyone on a pilgrimage of hope

that involves such risk, such daring, such unconditional love.

*When his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to command
fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them.*

Other ancient authorities read:

*[Jesus] rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of
Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them."*

This is where the rubber hits the road, on the road less traveled.

Here's where Jesus quit preaching and got to meddling.

"Rejection of Jesus or His followers is never reason to call down fire from heaven.

There are no human qualifications —religious, ethnic, cultural, or moral—

that exclude anyone from being addressed by God's message

of forgiveness, reconciliation, and renewal,

[all of] which are the essence of Jesus, His life and teachings."

—New Proclamation, Year C, Ed. by Marshall Johnson.

As a matter of fact, on the road not taken by so many, taken by too few,

we find Jesus showing compassion and forgiving grace

to those with whom He walks

as well as to those who reject Him, who slander Him,

and for those who will be crucified beside Him.

Reject God's loving advances if you must,

but Jesus will still love you, still defend you,

still invite you to break bread, to belong,

to be saved and redeemed by the same love of a rejected God.

"Do not expect Jesus to offer easy options." — Fred Craddock

I read somewhere that a great spiritual leader said to love our enemies,

to pray for those who persecute you,

to forgive not once or twice or seven times but 70 times seven.

On this spiritual pilgrimage we call a life of discipleship,
as we follow Christ on the way to Jerusalem and the Cross,
our eyes on the prize, pep in our step, cups overflowing,
we affirm that God wills for us to empower our neighbors
-- our families and friends and strangers who we have yet to meet --
God wills for us to empower all we can in any way we can,
to empower folks near and far
to have the right to self-determination of their selves,
their bodies, their nations, their choices
as they live out God's call to love and live.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said that
"the moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

We say to you and the whole world today
that the long, moral arc of the universe that leans toward the ways of justice
is made up of people, people like you,
people who've taken roads less traveled,
people who have gone against the tides of hate,
people who have sat with the bereaved and grieved,
people who have made whole the fragmented,
people who have overcome the slings and arrows
of harmful words, hurtful blows
choosing to respond like Jesus Christ,
people who rise up as one body
and offer in return a balm of healing,
open hands for holding, cups of cold, living water.

Pilgrims following God in this new day, in this new beginning,
with our faces set toward Jerusalem and the awaiting costs of discipleship,
shape tomorrow today.

Robert Kennedy embodied this pilgrimage when he said,
*"It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief
that human history is shaped.
Each time a [person] stands up for an ideal,
or acts to improve the lot of others,
or strikes out against injustice,
he [or she] sends forth a tiny ripple of hope."*

Don and Carolyn Middour walked this road not taken by so many;
yet take it they did.

They shared a morality which recognized the downtrodden neighbors in our midst,
blessed people who are put down or oppressed or pushed aside
through no fault of their own;

Carolyn shared that she felt empathy, compassion, a oneness with them,
just as her Jesus had when He walked dusty roads on earth,
just as the Holy Spirit called to her to be and to share the Good News.
Her compassion for the downtrodden was not limited to beings on two legs.
Don and Carolyn took in a couple of downtrodden puppies,
who once were strays yet quickly became family.
Moose and Matilda were a blessing and were blessed,
especially when she fed the poor pups begging under the table.

Don and Carolyn, avid listeners of Robert Frost,
avid followers of Jesus Christ,
avid parents, grandparents, members of this church
they loved and lived into, left a legacy of hope, creating ripples of hope.
They and numberless diverse people doing and being and sharing
acts of courage and belief form the beloved community,
a sacred respite, a safe home, a way station for new arrivals,
a launching pad for departing, to go along urban avenues where walks Jesus,
whose face is set to go to Jerusalem.

Jesus of Nazareth made a choice at a crossroads.
He took the road less traveled,
and that has made all the difference.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

EXTRA MATERIAL:

After Hurricane Katrina blew through and tore apart the Gulf Coast ten years ago,
our congregation took three mission trips to help rebuild homes and lives,
staying in Christian Churches and sharing God's love and labor.

Over the course of three years we traveled
to Moss Point, Mississippi; Gulf Port, Alabama; and Slidell, Louisiana.

On the August day in 2005 that Hurricane Katrina bore down on Moss Point, MS,
Ann Pickett took shelter.

After the storm, Ann Pickett emerged and looked around at the devastation.

"She thought about her wedding, only three days away.

...She went to church, but not just to bow her head and pray.

*She took [to church] her wedding food from her own freezer and,
in the church kitchen, she started to cook for her neighbors.*

Ann and her fiancé cooked up their wedding feast for any who came.

*They prepared that meal on their own initiative,
offering it up to the Spirit of God.*

*The location for the meal of grace was in a temple that bore the name:
Jesus Christ, Moss Point Christian Church.*

Truth be told, disasters often bring out the best in human beings.

After flood and tornado and hurricane,

...people [are] putting aside differences

and reaching out to help their [- our -] neighbors.” [1]

In God’s time Ann Pickett got married; she is now Ann Pickett-Parker.

She served faithfully as the vice president of our International Disciples Women’s Ministries.

“One day she launched into action because she calls herself a Christian.

She set a table out in Christian love for her neighbors,

any and all, following the example of Jesus.” [2]

[1] “Whole: A Call to Unity in Our Fragmented World” by Sharon Watkins, 2014. Page 29.

[2] Ibid. P. 30.