

“The Road Less Traveled”

Matthew 16:21-23

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Communion Devotion

On four occasions in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus talked to his disciples about his crucifixion and resurrection. Repeatedly, he told them he must go to Jerusalem and voice his disapproval of the religious leaders who were in charge of the Temple. Each time, his message to the disciples met with silence or resistance.

Our text focuses upon the first of these four accounts. In this one, Peter immediately grabbed Jesus and rebuked him for even thinking he would be treated like the ancient prophets who preceded him or John the Baptist who prepared the way for his ministry.

As you read all four gospels, it becomes clear the disciples did not want Jesus to make that final trip to Jerusalem to observe Passover. Why? They believed it was too risky.

Certainly not all, but many of the religious leaders who resided in Jerusalem were upset with Jesus. On numerous occasions, Jesus exposed their hypocrisy and corruption.

He accused them of misplacing their values and priorities because he believed they cared more about their own wellbeing than the welfare of those God called them to serve. To Jesus, the ruling elders appeared to be addicted to power, prestige, attention and money. They were driven by selfishness and greed, and their lives in no way reflected the heart and nature of God, at least not the God he knew so well.

This was especially true for those selling animals and exchanging money at exorbitant prices in the Temple. Jesus saw them for what they were, religious racketeers sucking the last

coins out of the pockets of those who could least afford it. It was obvious to Jesus that community, compassion and God had been pushed out of the Temple by greed and corruption.

When Jesus indicted the scribes and Pharisees for their abuse of power and neglect of those who were struggling to survive, they hit back hard. They did everything they could to discredit Jesus and undermine his ministry, and I am not surprised. When you mess with people's pocketbooks, you discover a side of them you never knew.

When they realized he was not intimidated and did not buckle under their relentless attacks, they plotted to kill him. Several times they came close to arresting Jesus so they could silence his voice. Each time he escaped, which infuriated them and made them more determined to capture him.

Going to Jerusalem to observe Passover, especially under these circumstances, was too dangerous according to Jesus' disciples. They knew Jesus would confront the religious leaders on their turf, making it impossible for his closest followers to protect him.

For this reason, you understand why the disciples were adamant about not going to Jerusalem that year. They were convinced the road Jesus needed to take was the one that led away from Jerusalem, not to it. Surely, before it was too late, they could talk him out of entering the eye of the storm and persuade him to return to the safer region around the Sea of Galilee.

But, they could not.

"Let us also go that we may die with him," Thomas said to the other disciples when Jesus told them plainly he was going to Bethany, less than two miles from Jerusalem, to help his dear friend, Lazarus. (John 11:16) Thomas voiced the fears and anxieties of every disciple, but he also matched the courage of Jesus by refusing to abandon Jesus in perilous times.

There are two kinds of courage in our world. First is the courage that rises to the occasion in an emergency or a crisis.

Adversity brings the best out in some people, and aren't we glad? We need people around us who are strong and steady when the world is spinning out of control.

There is also a courage that chooses to do the difficult when everyone else avoids it. This road, the one less traveled, is paved with noble dreams, grand visions, selflessness, passion, commitment, sacrifice and generosity.

This is a higher courage, the kind Jesus exhibited all the way to the cross. He chose to do the difficult even when faced with ample opportunities to play it safe and avoid his captors.

Why did Jesus do this? Above all else, Jesus wanted to be faithful to the God who sent him into this world to serve rather than be served, to heal rather than inflict wounds, to give rather than take, to love rather than hate, to be honest rather than deceive, to be humble rather than boast, to forgive instead of seeking revenge and to pursue peace instead of war.

He wanted to offer an alternative voice on how to live and vision of a new world order by confronting evil, righting wrong, lifting up the lowly, liberating the oppressed, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, comforting the grieving, giving people a second chance and building bridges of goodwill, understanding, reconciliation and hope instead of erecting walls of suspicion and hate.

To accomplish this mission and make hope visible, Jesus would need to travel down roads others avoided. For sure, he would need to go to Jerusalem, not back to Galilee.

And he did.

Which one of your family members or friends has recently taken the road less traveled? Why did they take this difficult path paved with noble dreams, grand visions, selflessness, passion, commitment, courage, sacrifice and generosity? Why did they accept big challenges and take risks? Why were they so courageous?

Were they driven by a desire to make a difference in your life?

Is it time for you to be this courageous and take the road less traveled?