Acts 16:6-10 *When the Road is Closed*  August 20, 2023

The Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill

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We confront a lot of choices in life, and some of them are important. We have to make choices about relationships, colleges, jobs, churches, the leaders we elect, and whether or not to make another move. And we constantly make choices about how we will use our time, our money, and our fleeting years.

Since we are a people of faith, we pray about these choices. And he more important the choices are, the more fervently and repeatedly pray. But after we’ve made our choices, and worked hard to succeed in them, we sometimes come to the conclusion we got it wrong, and we now regret our decision. So, what does that mean about our spirituality? Were we not listening well to God’s directions? Did we miss the will of God? Or was God not speaking? As the Apostle Paul learned, those are probably not the right questions.

In our text today, Paul was on his second missionary journey along with Silas, Luke, and Timothy. The purpose of this trip was to strengthen the churches he established on the first missionary trip with Barnabas. After spending time with those churches, Paul wanted to head south into the Roman province of Asia, which is now the nation of Turkey. Believing they were called to evangelize this region of the empire they headed south down into Asia. They probably took an old road called the Via Seabaste. But we are told the Holy Spirit stopped the journey.

We are not told how the Holy Spirit prevented them from moving ahead. Maybe God told them to turn around. Maybe the Via Seabaste Road washed out, which archeologists tell us often happened. It doesn’t matter. Sometimes the Spirit uses a still small, persistent voice to make God’s will known. Sometimes the road washes out. What is clear is that they aren’t going south.

This illustrates an important insight about how we discern the will of God on life’s journey. *The Spirit guides us along the way.* That’s not what we prefer. What we want is for God to give us the goal, and some suggestions about the best route - like a celestial Google Maps, with highlighted roads along the way. But God doesn’t give us a map. That’s because God prefers to go on the journey with us, and a companion is better than a map. That companion on the journey is the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Sometimes, even with the Holy Spirit as our companion, the road ahead washes out. A prospective employer calls to say they’re giving the job to someone else. Or a hopeful date with someone goes south. Sometimes a dream you really wanted to come true crashes on the rocks. It is all a way of hearing “No” from your sacred traveling companion. But the “No” doesn’t mean stop moving. It only means the Spirit is telling you to stop moving in this direction. Go in another one. If you cannot go south, then go north. If you cannot get one job, or admission into one school, apply to another. If one treatment for your disease doesn’t work, try another. But you have to stay on the move. Don’t second guess your spirituality, and don’t wait for more directions than God has given you. Apparently, the Spirit has already told you all God has to say at this point of the journey. You’re not going south.

So, Paul and his missionary companions then tried to head north to a place called Bithynia, which is by the Black Sea. But again, the Spirit prevented them from moving North. Another road somehow closed to them.

I love this part. They came from the East. They tried to head south and were prevented. Then they tried to head north and were again prevented. So, I imagine the Apostle Paul then looked at his companions on the journey and said, “Well, at least now we know the direction the Lord wants us to go – west!”

They head as far west as they could before they hit the Aegean Sea and stop at the seaport town of Troas. Maybe they admit in Troas to being very confused about where they are going, but they’re very clear about where they are not going. How many times have you looked at your life and wondered how you got to this job, this community, this life? It is not because of your plans, and maybe it is far better than you planned, but you somehow ended up in Troas.

Our mission is not to get to the right place in life. That’s God’s job. Our mission is to know the God who travels with us. So, you were not wasting time on the wrong roads that led you in the wrong direction. A closed road sign is always a call to worship. If you find yourself drawing closer to God because you are confused, you have to wonder if the road was really all that wrong. There is a redemption for everything, even the detours.

God will eventually get you where you are supposed to be. As the saying goes, “God can use all of the wrong roads to get you to the right place.” That’s because God owns all the roads. Sometimes it is not until you are in Troas that you realize the necessity of taking all of those detours to get there. So, in the words of the great theologian Yogi Berra, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” God owns the left and right fork. You cannot choose your way out of the love of God who travels with you.

Often when people are standing at the crossroads of an important decision, they will come to see a pastor. They could stay at home with the kids or keep working at the office. They could take the new job or keep the old one. They could move into a retirement facility or keep the big house. They could stay in a relationship that is deeply damaged and painful or move away from it. I try to focus them on their freedom and responsibility to make the choices, but that is not what they want to hear. They want to know the answer to the question, “What is the right choice?” They want to know, “What does God think I should do?”

The subtext of this is that they want to be certain. But nothing is deadlier to our faith than trying to be certain. Certainty makes no room for faith, and we can only be drawn to God or any other relationship by faith.

I once had a graduating student come to see me who had two job offers. One was in Chicago and the other in Houston. He wanted me to pray with him, asking that he would make the right choice. I mentioned that maybe we should pray for those who had no job offers. He quickly agreed, but soon returned to the question about what offer he should accept. So, we reviewed his pros and cons list for each job. He read to me from his journal. He even explained his Myers-Briggs personality pattern, although I didn’t know how that was going to help. Finally, near the end of the hour we prayed, and I asked God to give him peace and even joy in the opportunity to make this choice. When we were done, he said, “But you still haven’t told me where I should go. Chicago or Houston?” With as much spiritual profundity as I could muster up, I said, “I don’t know.” This is always when people figure out why pastoral counseling is free. But how could I know the answer to that question? What I wanted to ask him was, “Do you really think God is up all night worrying, ‘I hope he picks Chicago because I can’t help him in Houston.’”

Let me tell you what God is very concerned about. It isn’t which road you take. As Psalm 25 declares, “All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and righteousness.” What concerns God is that you attend to the steadfast love from heaven that unfolds along the way. God is not a traffic cop who directs the course of life you should take. You are loved too much for that. And out of that love God gives you the wonderful blessing of freedom, promises to be with you on all of the roads, turns you around when you need to turn, and always offers grace when our choices hurt others or ourselves.

We all need to live with a working theology of Plan B. This is true for churches as well as individuals. The theology of Plan B works like this: I thought I was supposed to do plan A. I was wrong. Now I need Plan B. It isn’t very complicated, but it is profoundly important. The Bible is filled with people, who we now think of as heroes of the faith, who had to move to Plan B. Abraham’s Plan A was to stay settled at home in Haran. Moses’ Plan A for freeing the Hebrews was to kill the Egyptian taskmaster. David’s Plan A was to be a shepherd. Peter’s Plan A was to prevent Jesus from going to the cross. Paul’s Plan A was to head south into Asia. All of them had to go to Plan B, and sometimes C or D, but in the discovery that they were wrong about Plan A, they drew closer to God, which was God’s plan all along. Now some of us are up to plans X, Y, or Z, I know. That’s okay. Go to double letters if you have to. But you have to get off the hook for being right about all your choices. If even the Spirit filled Apostle Paul got confused along the way with his choices, the chances are good that we’re not always going to get it right either. Insisting on always being right is hubris, which is one of the deadly sins.

There is a wonderful epilogue to this story of our missionaries stumbling into Troas. While they were there, Paul received a vision to cross the sea to go to Macedonia. This was the first time the gospel entered Europe. And from Europe, it eventually came to America, and to Philadelphia, and to the Presbyterian Church of Chestnut Hill. And it all happened because a few confused missionaries kept moving in any direction they could when they hit a closed road.

There may be precious days of clear vision from God. But mostly there are days of just faithfully moving ahead with Plan B, certain only that the faithful God is on the journey with us. Amen.