

Forks in the road

Pastor Hubert Den Draak (reading: Luke 12:49-65)



What if you woke up one day, and everything you said and did was out of character for you? Let's say you're an early riser, but now you sleep in till ten. You normally have oatmeal for breakfast, but now you want ham and eggs. Usually you're laid-back person, but today you're chatty and your friends can't get a word in edgewise. They know you as an organized person, but today you're scatter-brained and all over the map. You don't particularly like classical music, but now you go to a concert of Wagner's Ring of the Nibelungen - all six hours of it!

How do you think the people around you would respond to that? Well, shocked and confused to say the least; maybe also upset and angry.

Jesus' words in today's gospel lesson must have been just as shocking and just as upsetting for his disciples, the people who thought they knew him. For almost three years they had traveled with him, and they thought they knew what he stood for. They had heard him preach his values time and time again. That love was more important than money, and that people were more valuable than programs, and that forgiveness was more powerful than revenge. But now, Jesus seems to turn 180 degrees away from his character.

"You think I have come to bring peace to the world" Jesus begins. "I have not come to bring peace, but division. Because of me, households will be divided. Sons will argue with their fathers. Daughters will disagree with their mothers. Good friends will be at odds with one another. And all because of me."

If that message doesn't bother you, I must tell you that it bothers me. Because my perception of Jesus is that he has called people to come together in unity and agreement. One of his names is "The Prince of Peace"! And the apostle Paul writes "that they will know we are Christians by our love." But now, Jesus' words seem to contradict all of that. Not unity, but division. Not peace, but the sword.

I believe that the vast majority of all human beings want to live at peace and agreement with others. In spite of the fact that the world is filled with so much discord and disagreement, I believe that most of us do not want to harm others. If you think back to the most enjoyable and fulfilling times in your family, or in your workplace, or even in this church, they will probably be the

times when everybody was in harmony with each other, and there was no conflict or division. That's a beautiful, wondrous thing.

But the problem comes when "peace" changes from "true harmony" to "not rocking the boat". When peace just means we're not openly fighting. When our goal becomes to simply get along and avoid confrontation, that often leads to abandoning who we are and what we stand for. I think it was the comedian Bill Cosby who once said "I don't know the secret to success, but the secret to failure is trying to please everyone." You have to make choices, you can't have it both ways.

I recall being out camping as a teen with my parents, together with my younger brother and sister. My sister was torn between her two brothers. I was on the dock on the dock, saying to her "stay with me, I got potato chips!" But my brother was in a rowboat saying "no, no, come with me, we'll go out on the lake!" There she stood, one foot on the dock, the other foot on the edge of the boat, and the boat was moving - until she reached the point of no return... Trying to please everyone, trying to not decide, she ended up falling into the water with a big scream and gulps of water.

I think this is exactly what Jesus is addressing in the gospel lesson today. He is warning us that there will be times when following him will require us to turn away from something else. There will be times in our life when we have to make choices, when we'll be required to say "yes" to one thing, and therefore "no" to the other. And of course, what we'll try to do is the same what my sister did on the swimming dock. We try to have it both ways. We try to say "yes" to it all, and we end up falling in between the seams, and being miserable.

Choosing between the call of Christ and the call of the world is usually not an easy one. For one thing, the call of the world looks awfully attractive sometimes and a lot of people are following it; and the call to discipleship can sometimes look rather stark with not many people following it. Also, there isn't much in it for us; it won't make us rich or famous, and it definitely won't make our lives any easier.

A second factor is that following Christ might require us to change directions, or break promises, or go back on commitments that we have made. For instance, you and your business partner are involved in practices that are unethical, until you decide that you just cannot be part of it anymore. Your conscience and your faith will simply not allow you to do so. What do you do? Keep the "peace" (there is that word again) and the profit? Or do you find the courage to say "no more!", and let down your business partner, maybe even cause him a lot of difficulties? Not an easy decision...

I know of a number of marriages and relationships in which one partner wants to go to church, but the other, let's say the man, doesn't want to attend. The one who stays home will usually say that they don't need the church to be spiritual. And who are we to say they're wrong? So one goes to church on Sunday morning, the other doesn't; fine.

But then the one who goes to church realizes she needs more, and so she goes to a bible study group. And then is asked to serve on the board, which she actually enjoys. Which leads her to thinking about being a Presbytery rep. But now the husband has enough of this religion and reminds his wife that this wasn't what they had agreed upon. So now his wife has to choose between her husband, to whom she had promised, and her God and faith family, to whom she had also promised.

So when Jesus says, "From now on, a family will be divided because of me", this couple knows exactly what that can mean.

So, I'm wondering about you today. Has *your* faith ever caused you having to make a difficult choice? Have *you* ever had one foot on the boat and one foot on the dock, so to speak? And were you able to make an intentional decision, or did you try and avoid the tough decision? If you were able to make that tough decision, then you understand exactly why Jesus said what he did.

When I was a child Holland, my parents would take us to a theme park far away. I mean, it was at least a ninety-minute drive! And I have this picture etched in my memory of signs that warned of a fork in the road ahead. Whenever we saw those signs we got excited because we knew we were getting close! There were road markings, and announcement signs for miles, it seemed. And when we reached the fork, there was this big, orange flashing light, which divided the highway. One way led to the theme park, our destination. The other way led to Belgian border. Nothing against Belgium, but that was *not* where we wanted to go! I remember it as a tense moment. Because I realized that every time we got there, my dad had to make a decision which direction to go. He had to think about it: go left or go right?

My sense is that the Christian life is like that. Every day, we are called to make choices, decisions as to which way we will go that day. Sometimes those decisions are costly - not just in terms of money, but also in terms of family, or friendships. But if our destination is important to us, if we manage to take off our blinkers and see God's bigger picture, we make the correct choice. Not every time, perhaps, but hopefully often enough.

May God give us the wisdom *and* the courage to make those choices in the days and weeks and years ahead. As individuals - and as a faith family. Amen.