

January 10, 2021

1 Corinthians 1:10-18 “A Little Frost on the Ground”

Say what you will about 2020 being an awful year, but 2021 doesn't seem to be starting out very well either. But I'm not ready to write this off as a “bad year.” Yet. When you look into the not-too distant past, there have been *plenty* of bad years just in the last century. The teen years of the 20th century is a good example. As is the case now, the world was facing a global pandemic from 1918 – 1920. The headline event, though, was World War I. It's pretty likely that everyone here has probably met someone who lived during those “terrible teen” years and have heard stories about their experience. American poet Robert Frost wrote a poem as sort of a commentary on what was going on, especially as it related to the First World War

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 travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

This poem is about the lure of the well-trodden path. And believe me, the temptation to follow the well-trodden path is powerful. In 1914, Europe was at a fork in the road at the diverging of two paths. One path, the path most taken in the history of that continent, led to the darkness of war. The other way, the road less taken, was (and is) the hard way of diplomacy and collaboration in order to make way for peace. In 1914, and again in 1939, Europe chose war, which was the most familiar path. I'm not saying that Europe didn't wrestle with the choice. I'm not even saying that everyone who decided to wage war felt good about it or even thought it was the only choice. We, as flawed human beings who are blessed by God with free will and choice, are obsessed with making sure that there are winners and losers. As we're learning in our Bible Study of the books of Samuel, war seems to be our default setting. It's been said that most wars waged throughout history are all about control of natural resources, trade routes, and strategic military ground. Even the ones that are supposedly waged for religious reasons. World leaders become intoxicated by the lure of power, status and wealth. History shows us that in most cases, we take the road most often traveled whenever we find ourselves at the fork in the road where we have a choice. Yet Jesus teaches us to,

“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.” - Matthew 7:13-14

The text we have in front of us this morning comes from the Apostle Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. This was written only 20 – 30 years after Jesus died, and yet Jesus' followers were ... well ... having a hard time following Jesus' teachings. But hey, they were human. Just

like you. Just like me. And again, as humans, we struggle when we find ourselves at a place in our journey where we can either take the easy path that leads to destruction or the hard path that leads to life. We ask, “Why can’t the right path be easy? Why does everything have to be so hard? Isn’t Jesus the one who four chapters later in Matthew’s gospel said, ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’”? (11:28-30)

Yes he did. But that was meant for those who are “carrying heavy burdens.” The folks who are offered the light burden are the people who have very limited choices about which way they can turn. For the rest of us? We’re the ones who are called to choose the more difficult road. So these people in the Corinthian church weren’t immune to the lure of the easy road. Not only did they forget that Jesus calls us to the narrower path, but they forgot some his other teachings like, “Love one another as I have loved you.” Sound familiar? Not if you’ve kept up with the news this week. I hope it bothered you as much as it did me that along with a Confederate flag there was also a Christian flag that was being paraded around the floor of the Senate Wednesday during an attempted siege of the Capitol building. The members of the Corinthian church seemed to be obsessed with the desire to lord power over each other. They became like a modern political party, forming factions and gathering around charismatic leaders, each claiming a holier ground than the others. And each little faction in the Corinthian church claimed that their version of faith and practice was more authentic than the others. Not too much different than what we see among churches today.

On a good day, when we get riled up in the church about issues, we regard people who don’t agree with us with suspicion. On a bad day, especially when we swallow the fear and propaganda Kool-Aid, people who don’t agree with us become the enemy. They become the faces of all that is wrong with the world. And whether we like it or not, those outside the church are watching us. They pay attention to our

shenanigans. They notice when people fly the Christian flag while acting in anti-Christian ways. And here's the thing, a lot of those folks out there who are watching us are at least somewhat familiar with Jesus' teachings. So when we support causes that discriminate against poor and marginalized people or when we blindly give our support to leaders or causes that blatantly go against Jesus' teachings, these folks notice. And this is one of the reasons why the church is having such a hard time convincing people that we're all about Jesus.

That was the struggle of the Corinthian Church too. But then along came Paul. He wasn't going to put up with *their* shenanigans! He's saying, "What does any of this have to do with the message of the cross?! I didn't come here using my power or persuasive rhetoric to seduce you. I just came with the message of the cross, which is sheer foolishness to those who lust for power." The message here is, "If we say we're Christians, if we say we're followers of Christ, then there can be only *one* power and that's the power of love. The message of the cross ... the message of Jesus' crucifixion is about laying down our power for the sake of including *everyone* in God's love."

And that, folks, is the road less traveled. That's the path that we are called to take. It's the path that God took by sending Jesus into this world in the first place! But most of the time, we humans are afraid to take it. We don't want to have to deal with each other's sin let alone *bear* each other's sins. There's too much hurt. Too much burden. Not enough certainty that what we do will make any difference in the lives of those who we don't like. But we are called to share equally in God's justice. We are called to assume that those who we label "the other" have a claim to our welcome and our service.

Paul had to step in and tell the Corinthians, "Listen: This is the way." And this way isn't always easy. This is Jesus' way. And Jesus' way involves getting hands-on with the impure. It means loving the loveless. It's the path where we discover how the kingdom of God is drawing closer. "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done *on earth*." If the God of

the Christians were a God who pandered to political success or popular opinion, then Jesus wouldn't have lived such a tough life or died such a horrible death at the hands of corrupt government and corrupt, over-institutionalized religion. If Jesus took the easy path, he would have marched into Jerusalem with an army of Zealots and taken power by force. He would have built an empire on the labor of the poor and on the backs of the ritually unclean. If God were really like that, then Jesus would have taken the way most travelled.

But he didn't. And, if we are his disciples, and we are, then we won't either. We'll take the way less traveled. The way that looks out for the "other" even at deep personal cost. The way that *doesn't* give into fear or hate or bigotry. The way that *doesn't* lose touch with our identity as bearers of the light in the world because we're busy aligning ourselves with corrupt political ideologies and leaders ... baptizing their corruption while we scramble for a place at the table among the world's kingdoms. The way we're called to take compels us to own up to and face our fear of the "other." The way that embraces vulnerability and rejects defensiveness.

The way less travelled is the way of Christ. He calls us as he called his disciples to accompany him on that way. To leave behind the sin that entangles us and lay claim the power to welcome and love even our enemies. There is no greater persuader or encourager than the God who was in Christ. May God grant us courage to choose the way less travelled. For that, and that only, will we make a difference: For ourselves, for our church, for our world.