

YOU MUST CHOOSE YOUR OWN PATH

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We don't always like what we hear and we do not always accept the invitations given us, especially if they require of us something we are hesitant to give. Once upon a time two elderly friends were conversing and one said to the other, "Elmer, aren't you getting hard of hearing lately?" "Yes I am," Elmer said, "And I went to see the doctor about it." "What did he say?" "He said if I didn't quit drinking so much, I'd get as deaf as a post." "Are you going to quit?" "No," Elmer said, "I tried it for two weeks. My hearing improved all right, but I went back to drinking because I liked what I was drinking more than what I was hearing." Today's Gospel lesson is a story of hearing and choosing not to hear, a story about making choices, a story of contrast comparing the clear sense of direction exemplified by our Lord with the ambivalence, confusion and resistance of those who said they wanted to follow Jesus as disciples.

Once there was, in the city of Savatti in northern India, a large center where people would come to meditate and to listen to the Buddha's teachings. Every evening, one young man used to come to listen. For years he came everyday to listen to the Buddha, but never put any of what he learned into practice. After a few years, one evening this man came a little early and found the Buddha alone. He approached him and said, "Sir, I have a question that keeps arising in my mind." "What is your question?" the Buddha asked. "Sir, for many years now I have been coming to your meditation center, and I have noticed that some who come here have reached the final stage; quite obviously they are fully liberated. I can also see that others have experienced some change in their lives and are much freer than before. But sir, I also notice that a large number of people, including myself, are as they were or sometimes they are even worse. They have not changed at all, or have not changed for the better. Why should this be, sir? Why don't you use your power and compassion to liberate them all?"

The Buddha smiled and said, "Young man, where do you live? What is your native place?" "Sir, I live here in Savatti." "Yes, but your facial features show that you are not from this part of the country. Where are you from originally?" "Sir, I was born in the city of Ragba, some 50 miles to the east. I came and settled here in Savatti a few years ago." "And have you severed all connections with Ragba?" "No sir, I still have friends, relatives and business there." "Then certainly you must travel from Savatti to Ragba often?" "Yes sir. Many times each year I visit Ragba." "Having traveled and returned so many times on the path from here to Ragba, certainly you must know the path very well?" "Oh yes sir. I know it perfectly. I might almost say that even if I were blindfolded, I could find my way to Ragba and back again." "And when your friends ask you for directions; when they ask you to explain the path from here to Ragba, do you hide anything or do you explain the path to them clearly?" "What is there to hide, sir? I explain it to them very plainly, sir." "And these people to whom you give such clear directions, do all of them reach Ragba?" "Only those who walk then entire path to its end will find the city of Ragba."

"This is what I want to explain to you young man," the Buddha said. "People keep coming to me knowing that I am someone who has walked the path from here to Nirvana and that I know it perfectly. They come and ask me, 'What is the path to Nirvana, the path to liberation and freedom?' What is there to hide? I explain it to them clearly: 'This is the path.' If someone just

nods his head and says, 'Well said, well said, a very good path,' but won't take the trouble to walk it, how then can such a person reach the final goal? I do not carry anyone on my shoulders to take him to the final goal. No one can carry anyone else on his shoulders to liberation and wholeness. At most, with love and compassion, one can say, 'Well this is the path to serenity and wholeness and this is how I have chosen to walk on it.' But each person has to walk it himself. You have to walk on the path yourself." And with this, the young man went away sorrowful.

In today's Gospel, Jesus points us toward the path of compassion and acceptance, the path of love and liberation. In today's Gospel, Jesus is once again breaking with tradition. He is traveling across Samaria again. Most Jews would have considered the entire area unclean and pass well east on the other side of the Jordan River. But Jesus goes into Samaria en route to Jerusalem. It is because he is headed toward Jerusalem the Samaritans treated the apostles and Jesus with contempt. Samaritans were a mix of Jewish & Gentile descendants. They had intermarried after the Assyrians attacked Israel and carried off most of the people into exile. The Samaritans had established their own customs and their own place of worship. They had just as much hatred for Jesus as the Jews had toward them. This is why they did not welcome him, why they did not receive him. James & John become indignant with the way they are treating Jesus. They are angry and want to hurt those who hurt them. They know from the Hebrew scriptures Elijah once called fire down from heaven upon the priests of another religion and so they ask Jesus, "Lord, do you want us to call down fire to destroy them?"

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever wanted revenge because someone caused you pain? Have you ever lost your temper at someone who was accusing you of something and said something really cruel and vicious? Have you ever retaliated against someone who said something unkind about you and then felt righteous about it? Have you ever been so resentful and felt such malice toward another that you planned, plotted and worked toward their injury or destruction? All of human history makes clear the fact that each of us is, in part, an animal fully capable of hunting and killing our prey, searching out and harming any who threaten us. The disciples, in today's Gospel, make visible the vengeful and violent within. They are being tempted to take the path of the animal, the path of retribution and aggression.

But Jesus had already taken another path, the sacred path, the divine path of acceptance, humility and compassion. The disciples wanted the path of judgment & condemnation; Jesus showed them and us the path of acceptance. The disciples wanted the path of revenge and retribution; Jesus showed them and us the path of love and forgiveness. The disciples wanted to demand their rights; Jesus showed them and us the path of mercy and patient suffering. This path has been made clear and plain to us all. The spiritual path of Jesus is not the easy and comfortable way, but it is the only way to wholeness. No one can walk this path for us. Thinking about it and hearing sermons about it are not the same as choosing it and walking it. We must choose it for ourselves and, if it is to change us and our world, we must walk it everyday of our lives. But we do not have to do so alone. Let's walk it together, hand in hand, side by side. AMEN.