

When You Come to a Fork in the Road...

I Corinthians 1:1-9

Intro

There have been three times over the past two weeks that people have come up to me to thank me for the piece that I wrote for the cover of this month's Lifeline. Sounds like a very nice thing (to receive a compliment): and it is.

However, I have developed a ritual that once I have written something...it tends to leave my readily accessible memories if for no other reason than I have already moved on to thinking about and focusing on whatever the next thing that needs to be written or preached.

For example, someone who comes up to me on Wednesday to talk with me about a sermon that was preached the previous Sunday will probably get a look of, 'and what did you hear me say...because God help me, I can't recall right now?' That reality very much showed up in regard to the Lifeline article because those 'thank you's' (especially the first two) left me in a place of thinking (if not asking), 'and what did I write about?'

Well, because of our passage this morning, I ended up going back and rereading what got written a month ago because what we are about to hear speaks to the sentiment that is referenced in the Lifeline, which is very much a sentiment that a good chunk of the country feels as we head toward inauguration, which is a sentiment that was stood up to by a man whose memory we are called to reflect upon this weekend.

That sentiment is fear.

Paul wants those who are willing to listen to God through him, to have no part of this emotion that pervades so much of our world and our culture in a multitude of ways. What we hear in these opening verses of I Corinthians is that the God whom we worship, the God who has called us to be in fellowship, is a God who has enriched us in all things; is a God who has strengthened us so that when our time before the Creator finally arrives, we will be found blameless. That is a position of utter confidence, not in self, but in God; a position that is directed, not by the fear that will absolutely be a part of the world that we know until such time as we are able to be in the closer presence of the Divine, but instead by a reassurance that God walks with us (and for us) through all our days.

As you sit here today, what voice has more sway: fear or faith? The scripture reads this way.

I Corinthians 1:1-9

1 Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

2 To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵ for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— ⁶ just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— ⁷ so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁸ He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

“When You Come to a Fork in the Road...”

I finished my meeting on Wednesday morning and headed back into my office. Almost reflexively I turned on the radio (which is currently set to one of the New York news stations) and immediately I could my stomach begin to tie itself into a knot.

What I had tuned into was the president-elect’s press conference which (at that point) sounded more like a game of ‘the person who shouts the loudest win’s’ as opposed to an actual back and forth of question and response.

Now I get that every voice that I heard speaking had an agenda (I’m not so innocent as to think that everyone there wasn’t pushing toward a particular end or asking their questions (and giving their responses) with a particular intent).

But the anxiousness that immediately emerged, if it wasn’t related to, then certainly wasn’t all that far away from the emotion of fear.

The fact that such a feeling is connected to an incoming President is becoming more and more the norm as pundits, politicians, and reporters demonization of those whom they disagree with politically has grown louder and louder as the 24 hour news cycle ever increases in speed. Our President-elect has only upped the ante with his love of Twitter.

So it’s there. The fear and fear mongering.

But is it something that we are destined to be bound by?

Let me answer that question by asking you another: how different would our country, would our world look today if people of faith like Martin Luther King, Jr. were bound by the fear that was very much in their world and in their lives?

Exactly.

This is a truth that was also able to be lived out by the author of our scripture lesson as well. Paul knows that there are two very different paths that exist in terms of how we live in the world. He knows these paths because he was the one who empowered the maintenance of one of those forks in the road...before being led to maintain the other.

Remember it was Paul who, when we first meet him was known as Saul, who approved of the killing of the disciple named Stephen in the 7th chapter of Acts. Why did this act take place? Because Stephen stood up to declare the truth that Jesus Christ is Lord and that in Christ true

freedom exists. Saul approved of the killing. He knew the fear tactics that could be levied. He knew how difficult the path of faith may be. He understood the fork in the road moment that he was, at the very least, approving of, if not out and out creating.

And yet what does Paul say to those in the city of Corinth just a few years later?

He says, “[God] will ... strengthen you to the end” and “by [God] you were called into the fellowship of his Son.”

What Paul is saying is that we have been called by the Creator of all to, when we are faced with the fork in the road moment, to walk a path of faith. And then beyond that, that we need not worry about what the journey may hold because we will be strengthened so that we might be able to endure, even to the end.

Paul wants those who are able to hear what he is saying that we have been imbued in such a way that we can stand up and show through our actions, show through our words, that we will not live in fear, bound to the self-centered ways of the world, and certainly our current political climate, but instead that we will live in faith, beholden to a God who will grant us all that we need, regardless of how inadequate we may feel.

When you get to that fork in the road, which path do you walk upon?

Too often, and I don't know if this is more of a modern incarnation or just part of the way that humanity has always thought about these sorts of questions, but too often we lean upon the advice made famous by Yogi Berra: when you come to a fork in the road...take it! This leads us to becoming a chameleon that nods in agreement when we happen to be surrounded by those who are leaning the one direction...before we nod just as vigorously when we happen to be surrounded by people who believe the exact opposite.

God, through Paul, and not just Paul, but all those who have walked faithfully with the Lord, is saying in very clear tones: pick the path that has you walking with God, which exhibits His truth, which displays His love.

I will again lean upon the words of a man whose presence is able to be felt in our world in wonderful ways today, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He said on February 28th, 1954 at the Second Baptist Church in Detroit in regards to the segregation and racism that existed so openly in this country, “There is something wrong with our world, something fundamentally and basically wrong. I don't think we have to look too far to see that. I'm sure that most of you would agree with me in making that assertion.”

Those are the words of a prophet who operated from a position of faith, not of fear, who chose the path of God.

Was he perfect? Far from it!

But what he spoke was no less true, and its God-led impact was able to be felt as the country that he was speaking about elected a man of color to the Presidency less than 55 years later.

That's not a small transformation...that's huge and all because Dr. King and others with him spoke the truth as they walked with God.

Think of how different our lives would be if Dr. King had not taken that path of faith.

Think of how different our lives would be if he had looked at the world and said, "I can't say that. I'm too scared that I'll be killed." How different, and I think more sorrowful as well, our country and even our world would be, if he had not thought to himself, as we hear Paul say in our passage to the Corinthians, "you are not lacking in any spiritual gift."

He had the gift of proclamation and prophecy and through the use of those gifts in faith he was able to declare his dream that, "one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood." He was able to declare that dream, because he was willing to take the fork in the road that followed the path of a faith-filled life, and not that very different path that said that he should be afraid.

Getting back to that emotion that started to grip me as I turned on the radio a few days ago, it became a confirmation of the fork in the road moment that we have arrived at.

Are we going to take the fork in the road (and just list aimlessly)? Are we going to use whatever means necessary to get what we want (regardless of what that want may be)? Or will we lean upon the Lord, knowing and trusting His truths...and then living them out fearlessly by word and deed?

This fearlessness needs to be exhibited by us in our country today and not because it is leaning one political direction or the other but instead because the truth of God needs to be heard, seen, and felt, not just this day, but every day.

Yes, we should demand it from our elected and appointed officials, as well as the media, but we're not in control of them.

We are in control of us.

If, when we come to the fork in the road, we boldly and courageously walk with God in those truths that are of God then we will be able to do what we were supposed to be doing all along. Not worrying ourselves into fear regarding this, that, and the other thing...but instead championing and building up the Kingdom of God.

Remember, it's not just us! God is with us! Do we believe that? Because if we do, if you really do, then our lives will not be bound to toil upon the path of aimlessness or fear, but instead in the reality that, as a community, and as Paul has written, "in every way you have been enriched." Not just in a few ways, but in all ways. There is nothing that should cause us fear, and that is regardless of who happens to be in the office of the President, because we have been reminded of the truth that in all things we are held, supported and blessed by the living God.

We may feel ourselves at that fork in the road, and we now have the opportunity to walk with those who have gone before as together we walk in the truth of God boldly proclaiming His light, His love, his passion and compassion for all people.

What path are we going to take?

After Sermon Prayer

O most holy and gracious God, You are able to provide all that we need in order to walk upon the path of faith that You have called us to. God, help us to receive that support so that instead of living in fear, we stride forward in faith. Lord, let it be so. Amen.