

# PENTECOST

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The start of summer means, among other things, graduations, and I know that many of our families are enjoying the celebrations that go along with completing high school or college and the anticipation of what comes next. All the excitement also can carry with it some anxiety. If there's college in the future, or a first job, that's because a decision has been made—a choice for one school or job versus another, and perhaps a choice about a new place to live and an upcoming move. Many other decisions along the way contributed to this one: which school activities to do, which sports to play, what elective classes college major to choose. With all of this, there is the inevitable anxiety about how it will all turn out. Were these decisions the right ones? Will they lead to happiness, security and satisfaction? These are all versions of a question we all ask at times: Did I make the right choice? Did I choose the right path?

I use this example of graduating seniors only as one example, because anxiety about decisions is common to us all. My Friday message to you this week mentioned the often dizzying array of choices we face every day, even when it comes to simple things. Isn't it unbelievable that you can walk into the supermarket to get simple things like wheat bread, deodorant, or paper towels and be faced by dozens of choices? I've watched people stand there in the aisle, just needing some laundry detergent or razor blades, and trying to figure it out; I've done it myself: do I need fresh scent or spring breeze? Is the razor with three blades enough? Will four be too many? It's silly, but if we can sometimes get caught worrying about such little things. Of course, the big ones will trouble us, too. And many choices are more meaningful: Where should I go to college? Who should I marry? Is it time to move, to quit, to retire? Should I get the operation? These are real choices, they are forks in the road, and they cause us real anxiety, for what if we choose the wrong path? What will become of us?

I haven't talked about baseball yet this season, and this isn't really doing so, but thinking about choices I remembered one of Yogi Berra's famous quotations: "When you come to a fork in the road, it's best to take it." This is, of course, a joking reference to the more serious line from Robert Frost: "Two roads diverged in a wood...and I took the road less travelled by, and that has made all the difference." Frost's poem is maybe less about anxiety than it is about courage and nonconformity, and Yogi Berra's joke about it usually just makes us laugh. But we laugh because Berra reminds us of something important—sometimes we need to laugh because we worry about our choices. And it may surprise you, but Yogi Berra's quote contains some really good theology. For in many cases what God hopes for us is not so much that we would

always make the right choice. God hopes for us to know that we are loved. Whatever choices we make, whatever path we take. God will still be with us. You can see that in the Bible story we read this morning.

The story begins, “when the day of Pentecost had come...” Pentecost, which begins with a prefix for fifty, was the Jewish celebration marking the fiftieth day after Passover; Christians remember Pentecost as the day the Holy Spirit blesses the church. According to the story, many people had made the long journey from other lands to Jerusalem for Passover and had stayed through Pentecost—there was still a diverse crowd of travelers in the city for the holiday. Passover had taken place right before the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus; and at that time, the disciples had gathered in an upper room for their Last Supper. Those of you who were here last week heard the previous story in which the disciples have returned to that upper room. So they are all gathered in the upper room again, having faced with a surprising turn of events: the death of Jesus, and then his shocking resurrection, his appearances to them commanding them to continue the work they had begun together. This is so disorienting to the disciples that they have returned to the safety of the upper room to devote themselves to a period of prayer—they’re waiting and listening for the arrival of the Holy Spirit, to tell them what to do next. This is a story about the disciples at a fork in the road.

I imagine many of you would love it if our lives would play out much like this story seems to. You’ve come to a fork in the road and you don’t know what to do next. Wouldn’t it be great if you could sit down and pray and the Holy Spirit would come and tell you what path to take; and in this Bible story, the Holy Spirit shows up and is going to explain everything. So, are you ready to hear what happens?

Here’s the big surprise: When the Holy Spirit comes, the disciples are gathered in the upper room, and the Pentecost celebrators are gathered out in the street, all of the disciples are overcome with the power of the Holy Spirit and begin speaking about the inspiration they received--and they speak it in a hundred different languages. They can’t understand one another. Every version of God’s inspiration to them sounds different than the next one. The story says that skeptical onlookers thought the people were drunk. But for those who received the Holy Spirit, God’s inspiration was available to them in every possible language. God speaks in every language to these people who have come from many lands along every road. And God empowers them with the Holy Spirit and sends them out to serve along every one of the roads from which they came, all the way to the ends of the earth.

It seems to me that the Holy Spirit isn’t in the business of offering instructions about choosing one right path. God doesn’t pick one path; God makes them all holy. This probably seems unhelpful. Why can’t God just approve one path? Wouldn’t that be easier? Well, maybe. But have you ever thought about how frightening it would be if there was only one path where you could find the good life God wants for you? Have

you ever considered how limiting it is to suggest that God is only powerful enough to be with you along one path? Instead, have you ever considered what a gift it is that God can follow you on *any* path you take, even if you pick the wrong one—for that is a gift!

Do you remember the Parable of the Prodigal Son? A young man asks for his inheritance before his father is even dead, journeys to a foreign land and throws it all away and comes back penniless. That's not only a bad choice, it's a series of bad decisions; that's choosing the wrong path. But you all know how that story ends: the boy finally comes to his senses and returns home, hoping just maybe he'll be able to work his father's land like a slave...and the father welcomes him home. God followed the boy down that wrong path. Even if the path you choose isn't really the right one, God can travel with you too.

All too often, we have a strange concept of God. Theologian Craig Barnes says we treat God like a traffic cop who we expect to approve one path and deny another, but that's not who God is. God is a heavenly parent who loves us on whatever road we choose, and when and if we choose the wrong one, God still finds a way to love us all the way home. When it comes to decisions, we talk a lot about right paths, forks in the road, stuff like that; but Barnes suggest that this idea of a road be the wrong metaphor altogether. Life with God isn't so much a path as it is a river. (Barnes, *Searching for Home*, 127,133). Rather than worrying that we will choose the wrong road and God will not be able to follow us, we should imagine that we are afloat on a journey with God holding us up along the way, and there will be twists and turns along the way, but God will always carry us. The river of our lives can be treacherous—to be sure—but it always leads us home to God. Songwriter Chris Cornell, who died a few weeks ago, wrote a song that recalls the Prodigal Son story and in which God says, "I am not your rolling wheels, I am the highway. I am not your carpet ride, I am the sky..." (Cornell, "I Am the Highway, 2011). God is with us whatever path we choose. The choices we have in life are many, and many of them are important, no doubt. But it is also true that we make God awfully small if God is only able to travel on one path. God's love is greater than that. And to trust that God will follow us wherever we may go is what helps us to make choices and be at peace. It's one of the ways faith helps us to live a grounded life.

Perhaps you have not considered before that those words from Yogi Berra contain some great theology: "when you come to a fork in the road, it's best to take it." When we share the Lord's Supper together in worship, I often hope to give you different ways of thinking about it that may help you connect to this meal that represents God's love for us. We spend a lot of time worrying about making the right choices and wondering what God would choose. *What God chooses is to love us.* We want to figure out all of the right answers on our own. God wants us to receive love and trust the one who created us. You're going to be given bread and wine this morning as a sign of God's love to you. It's best to take it. Amen.