

Which Way?

Psalm 119:33-40 and Romans 13:8-14

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A note about this written sermon: this is an almost word-for-word transcription of a sermon that was preached from an outline, and reflects the colloquial and oral nature of the original.

Well this morning, I want to talk about one of the Psalms. Actually, it is the longest psalm in the book of Psalms, the Psalter, which is to be considered as the ancient hymnal of the Hebrew people used in temple worship, used to coronate a King, used in people's homes, used by pilgrims making their way, the slow ascent up to Jerusalem for festivals. Psalm 119 is an acrostic Psalm, which means that it uses letters, the beginning letter of each stanza, as a memory device. So there are 22 stanzas to Psalm 119 that correspond to the 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. And each of the verses within each stanza begins with that letter. So *Aleph* begins the first stanza and so on and so forth. The primary metaphor of Psalm 119 is that of a path. And I'm going to ask Kyle to display the verses of the section that we read starting with verse 33.

And it indeed begins with the metaphor of a path, as if the living of one's life is to be compared with the walking of a way through the wilderness, a pathway. And I think that for those who've been to the Holy land, and I'm going to ask Kyle to put a picture up here, if you've been to the Holy land . . . many of us have been through a trip that we organized . . . or by other means. And if you go to a place like the Jordan Valley, and you can see what it looks like here, the Jordan Valley and much of Israel is just a very dry, rocky, harsh environment. And so having a reliable path to travel is an extremely valuable thing because it's hilly, rocky, and there's a lot of danger. It may not be the straightest and easiest path. There's the temptation to take a shortcut to one's peril - falling off a cliff, having rocks fall upon one, or having thieves seize upon one.

But that's the metaphor that Psalm 119 employs to help us think about the question: What is the path that we're on? What is the path are we traveling through life? So I want to come back to Psalm 119, but I want to share a couple of other things first. We can put these under the heading 'random thoughts', but they do connect to the point at hand. I hope that you'll see. First thing I want to share with you is...I came upon a study in my sermon research this week done by researchers at the University of Michigan. They did a 27-year study over time. And this was published, by the way, in the Journal of the American Medical Association. They did a study about what factors contribute to a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment in life, and what factors contribute to long life, low mortality. And they found that there's one particular thing that was most correlated with those two things, a sense of fulfillment in life and longer life. And I'll tell you what that thing is in a minute.

I want to tell you another story. And this is a story about a person who lived in antiquity, was born about a hundred years before the birth of Christ. A man named Marcus Porcius Cato, also known as Cato the Younger. And Cato the Younger was a Roman Senator who was known for his impeccable attention to a life of virtue, sometimes much to the chagrin of his fellow senators who were not as committed to ethical behavior. And he would call them out and so forth. He won the loyalty of his soldiers, for example, by instead of sleeping in the tents of the officers, sleeping outside with his men. And for that, he won their loyalty. He was a practitioner of the philosophy known as Stoicism. Now let's take a minute, a little side trip here, and talk a little bit about Stoicism because that word stoic has, I think we would all agree, a kind of negative connotation in our culture.

It's kind of identified with a simply 'grin and bear it' philosophy, when Stoicism is much, much more than that. Because the Stoics, one of the things that they sought to do, is to practice virtue as a way to deal with whatever life might hand you. If you're in the storm, you're still good. If you're in the feast, you're at the feast, you're good; Stoicism is about approaching life with a kind of equanimity. And they did this through the development of discipline. They would do things like take really cold baths or they would embrace freezing statues, or they would sleep on the rocky hard ground as a way to inure themselves, get used to the suffering that life is inevitably going to hand us. And that was done, their discipline consisted of the practice of virtue, a life that is attentive to the right way of living.

And so this is very much illustrated in the life of Cato the Younger. One of the things that he's most famous for is not just his life and his devotion to virtue, but he's probably most famous for his death, the end of his life. He opposed Julius Caesar, who was declared at that time as an Enemy of the State. Julius Caesar was trying to overtake the state and become dictator of Rome and overthrow the democracy. And Cato was on the other side of that. There was a civil war and Cato's forces lost. And Julius Caesar was willing to make the magnanimous gesture of forgiving Cato. But you see if Cato accepted this, it would mean legitimizing the authority of Caesar who had taken over as dictator of Rome. And instead of compromising his virtue, Cato chose to end his life. He's famous for dying by suicide rather than compromise his virtue.

He was a person committed to certain principles that enabled him to experience the fullness of life no matter what came down the pike for him.

So...that study about the one factor most highly correlated with a sense of fulfillment in life and long life. What was that factor? *A sense of purpose*. Living according to principles that guide us beyond ourselves, beyond causes that have to do with getting what I want and getting what's in it for me. It's a life devoted to what is right. Period. "Turn my heart to your decrees and not to selfish gain. Turn my eyes from looking at vanities. Give me life in your ways."

The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, who is truly one of my philosophical and theological heroes, was an existentialist. We don't have lots of time to talk about what that means, but existentialism is basically the idea that no matter what life hands us, we have a choice about how we live, about how we deal with that particular situation. And he identifies three kinds of choices, basic choices that people can make in terms of how they live their life. And I'm going to talk about two of them. The first one, and probably the most common choice, is what he calls *the aesthetic life*. And this is a life simply devoted to the maximization of pleasure and the minimization of pain. It's a life where the name of the game is getting what I want. And one's satisfaction, however, is tied to the weather, as it were. When things are good. I'm good. When things are bad, I'm not so good. So, I have no choice in the matter. I'm subject to external factors beyond my control. And often in this way of living, my satisfaction has to do with external things like wealth, prestige, popularity, and so forth.

It's all about seeking pleasure and minimizing pain, getting what I want. I think is a good illustration of that way of life, the aesthetic life, is Augustine of Hippo, the great Saint, the person who later became Saint. But after a life, at the beginning of his life, when he was young, of pleasure seeking. He was a playboy...sex, drugs, and rock and roll. And he writes extensively about it in his book, one of the most famous autobiography ever written, his book called *Confessions*, talks about how he loved sex and loved stealing, not for what he stole, but for the act of stealing itself.

And, you know, we might not think - *that's not me. I don't live for pleasure and to minimize pain*. And yet I think this Psalm, *turn my eyes from looking at vanities*, is a call to take an inventory of that. If the path we're walking, if Psalm 119 compares to the living of our life, to the walking of a path, maybe we could consider that it's easy to walk a downhill path and we might not even realize that's the path that we're walking on. And that's a good metaphor of 'to go downhill'. It's easy to walk downhill, right? It's easy,

but we're going *downhill*. And if we're lucky at some point, like Augustine of Hippo, we realize that we're going nowhere. We're not really conscious of the way we're living. I read a famous quote from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. "If you don't know where you're going, then any road will get you there." You know, Kierkegaard compared to that kind of life, to being asleep on a hay wagon someone else is driving. And so the easiest way to live is "I just want to get what I want".

And if we're lucky, we realize like Augustine, that way of life is empty. It's enervating. I love that word. That's a kind of 25 cent word. That means exhausting. It may seem like it promises satisfaction, but it's exhausting to try the next thing and the next thing that might satisfy us, but never does. And so Kierkegaard gives us another alternative to that. He calls it *the ethical life*. It's a life lived according to principles that aim at what Paul calls the life most worth living. The life most worth living is devoted to practices of virtue, just like Cato the Younger. And these are practices that we as Christians advocate for as a way of life. This is what Paul is talking about. As Kyle said, the summary of these principles contained in the law, that's what the path is all about. According to the writer of Psalm 119, the path consists of practicing the precepts of the law, the Torah. And Paul summarizes those in one simple word, and the word is love. *Love*. That's pretty abstract. So he kind of lifts it out of the top ten commandments at the top of the pyramid. The big ten, the ten commandments, and all of these are under this one principle: Love. But as Christians, our aim is to internalize those principles; love and all that proceeds from it.

"Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us live honorably as in the day, not reveling in drunkenness, and not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy, instead *put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify our desires.*" What he's saying is, don't live according to the pleasure-pain principle. We live the life that really is life when we devote ourselves to those principles that guide us on the path that gets us there - to life.

And so here's one where I want to end with a challenge to you and to me, that we may say love is the highest principle. That's the law in summary, as Kyle was teaching our children. And so if it's not loving, don't do it. It's not very specific though. So my challenge is to think about what are those principles that guide your life? What is the path? What way are you traveling? Which way are you going? And what specifically might describe that? What are the core values that guide your life? Do you ever think about it? Maybe it's integrity. That's a big one for me. Integrity means *what you see is what you get*. And honesty is so important; honesty that's tempered by love. And so if I have a problem with somebody, I talk to them. That's the text from Matthew that we didn't read this morning that's prescribed by the lectionary. If you've got a problem with somebody, go talk to them, don't go talk about them. And that's hard. That may not be pleasurable. That may cost you a lot. But practicing that virtue is a way that leads to life.

Maybe one of your prime values is generosity. You discover that using the wealth that God has given you, you realize it's not mine. It's been given as a gift. And maybe you realize spending it all on yourself and your family isn't that satisfying. And then you get a taste of that joy that comes when we use our wealth to help somebody. When, we use our wealth for the sake of compassion. I can tell you there's nothing sweeter or better than that. I think it's a lesson that we always need to be reminded of. Our wealth is not our own . . . it comes from God. And we can't keep it past the grave. But what a sweet thing to use it, not for ourselves, but for other people.

Maybe one of your prime values is the biggest one: *transformation*, spiritual transformation. I refuse to live a shallow life, a superficial life. I'm going for a relationship with God that will be transformative. And so I devote myself to reading this book, to practices that enable me to have a deep and fulfilling relationship with God that transforms me. Maybe that's your value. Or justice. My prime value is to be out there on the street, advocating for justice, and God knows, we need to devote ourselves to that

practice of virtue. Psalm 119 invites us to take an inventory. What's the path? Which way are you going?
Write it down this week.

Amen.