

Many Paths

St. John's Evangelical Protestant Church

United Church of Christ

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Joshua 24:1-2, 14-18

24 Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. ² And Joshua said to all the people, ¹⁴ "Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.

¹⁵ Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." ¹⁶ Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ¹⁷ for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; ¹⁸ and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."

John 6:58-69

⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever." ⁵⁹ He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum.

⁶⁰ When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?"

⁶¹ But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, "Does this offend you? ⁶² Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?"

⁶³ It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴ But among you there are some who do not believe." For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. ⁶⁵ And he said, "For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father."

⁶⁶ Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷ So Jesus asked the twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to

whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”

This past week I have spent more than four hours in the Verizon store. My phone broke, and I set out to replace it. Thursday night, shortly before the store was closing, I went into the store and talked with Tony who showed me a variety of phones and answered a bunch of questions for me. Tony was great, but I felt rushed because the store was getting ready to close, and there were options I had to sort out; namely, there was a buy one get one free promotion – did Dale want a new phone, too?

So, that night I went home and got on the computer. I did some research on each of the phones and read loads of reviews on the computer. I talked to Dale. So, Friday I went back. I thought I was timing it well. I got there a little before 11 a.m. so I would make it in before the lunch hour, and I thought I was giving myself more than ample time to make it down to the church well before my 1:00 p.m. appointment. I knew exactly what I wanted – how long could it take?

I smiled as I walked in on Friday because it looked like my plan had worked. I had made it before the lunch hour crowd, and I was immediately introduced to Owais. I had decided I first wanted to review my plan to see if I could switch it and pay a little less and still have everything I need.

“Sure, I will be glad to help you with that.”

He pulls up our bill that has all of the details for 5 different phones on it. He figures out the base charges, and occasional extra charges, and it still doesn't add up. We finally determine the extra was taxes and surcharges.

He smiled. "Those taxes sneak up on you, don't they? They always do. Where I come from, Dubai, nothing is taxed; so, when my wife and I go shopping for something we are still always amazed! We think we are getting a great deal and that we are only going to pay \$50 or \$80 for something and then it always turns out to be more. Taxes .. but at least there are things provided for us in this country with those tax dollars."

Here was a guy who was gently and kindly reminding me to be thankful for the taxes we pay!

I told him what I wanted, and he kindly asked me why. Then he showed me some more options, and I asked more questions.

"There is this one, the Storm, with the touch screen, Mrs. Dwyer. I have it, and like it."

"I have heard that it can be slow if you are running multiple applications."

"That is true .. you need to be a little patient when some of things are loading."

"I am not patient when it comes to phones ...," I said, even as I was looking at my watch.

We talked a little more, and I decided on two phones, one for Dale and one for me. And of course they were more expensive than the one I had thought I would buy when I walked in.

We are at the checkout. Owais had opened up the boxes and had started to put in the battery.

“Wait!” I said. “I think the “Curve” will be just fine.

He smiled. “No problem.”

He packs up everything he has just spread out all over the counter, and we start over with two other new phones.

Then, he starts ringing all of this up and very calmly explains to me that the phone is buy one get one free, but I need to pay for it today and then will get a rebate. But it gets more confusing because I am eligible for a discount, as well as their promotional pricing. My mathematically challenged brain is trying to keep up and be sure that what I THINK he is telling me is actually what is going to happen. I must have asked him to explain it three different times. I am sure I could have asked the question 20 more ways, and he would have continued to answer with the same kindness and patience.

Meanwhile, I keep looking at my watch. If someone were doing this to me I would want to scream, “You are the one who keeps changing your mind and who has all of the questions ... stop looking at your watch!”

But instead, as he is working at getting my phone up and running, he says, “When do you need to be downtown, Mrs. Dwyer?”

“No later than 1 pm.”

“We can get all of this done but I won’t be able to transfer all of your contacts in time and have you downtown by 1:00 p.m. Can you come back in to do that? You will need to

bring your husband's phone in to activate his phone. Perhaps we could transfer your contacts at the same time?"

We had a deal, and I was off .. and walked into the church right at 1:00 p.m.

I won't go through the two-hours Dale and I experienced in the store on Saturday, except to say that Dale had questions of his own and a need to voice some of his own concerns about the company. Owais was as patient and as kind as he had been the day before.

Perhaps because I was so focused on getting my phone and getting out of there, I didn't ask many questions to Owais about himself. I have no idea if this is his dream job or if it is something he is doing as he prepares to do something else. Or perhaps it is something he does so that he can afford to do something else that he loves.

I do know that he does his job well.

"Choose this day whom you will serve." What does it mean to serve the Lord?

I used to think it meant one specific thing for every person. I used to think part of our job was to figure out what that one specific thing was. It involved paying attention to our specific gifts and then, somehow, lining them up with the vocation that was the best fit.

My own process would confirm the way I used to think about this. I was 12 when I attempted to line up what I thought were my gifts with different vocational choices. Often people's eyes bug out when I tell them I knew I wanted to be a minister when I was 12, and I feel fortunate that I do something I love. But I think I could also love running a bed and breakfast, or working at a

television station, or as a cook in a restaurant, or a manager of a store, or writing books, or as the person who takes your order behind the counter at Cup o Joe.

Barbara Brown Taylor in her book, *As Altar in the World*,¹ writes about her own experience with trying to figure out what it meant to serve the Lord: how we are supposed to determine our vocation in a way that is pleasing to God. She has a long list of things she has done. But while she was in seminary she had no real clue why she was there or what she was going to do with it, except that she loved the experience. Night after night she would pray to God seeking an answer. And finally she got one.

“Anything that pleases you”

“What? What kind of answer is that?”

“Do anything that pleases you and belong to me.”

On one level this was no help at because the ball was back in her court to figure it all out. On another level, it was very freeing. What Barbara had discovered was that it was not *what* she did, but *how* she did it that mattered. As she writes, “God had suggested an overall purpose, but was not going to supply the particulars for me. If I wanted a life of meaning, then I was going to have to apply the purpose for myself.”

The Buddhists lift up “right livelihood” as one of the flagstones of the Noble Eightfold Path.

Right Livelihood is one of the keys to waking up to the true nature of reality. Part of this would

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor. *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*. Harper Collins, 2009.

assume that there are certain kinds of work that are not good – like being a murderer, or making counterfeit money, or selling drugs. The basic principle is “do no harm,” but beyond that you are free to do many things.

The Indian philosophy includes the notion of karma yoga – literally, the work path to God – one of the many paths human beings have found that lead them to God. Karma yogis approach their work as a spiritual practice whether it is something as menial as spinning thread or washing pans, or more exalted like running a hospice program or a corporation.

As Christians, we follow one who is said to be fully both human and divine, the one who told us that he was the bread of life and that life lived in him would feed our spirit. To follow Jesus, we are to “love God with our whole heart and soul and mind,” i.e., we are to be as fully ourselves as we can.

Again, Barbara Brown Taylor writes with wisdom:

My chosen vocation ... remained a subset of a larger vocation, which was the job of loving God and neighbor as myself. Over the years I have come to think of this as the vocation of becoming fully human. Since people consider being human a liability, and “fully” would only make things worse, I should perhaps explain what I mean. To become fully human means learning to turn my gratitude for being alive into some concrete common good. It means practicing forgiveness of my and everyone else’s hourly failures to live up to divine standards. It means learning to forget myself on a regular basis in order to attend to the other selves in my vicinity. It means living so that “I’m only human” does not become an excuse for anything. It means receiving the human condition as a blessing and not curse, in all its achingly frail and redemptive reality.”

.... “Every time someone asked Jesus what God’s Realm was like, he told them a story about their own lives. Every time they asked him what they should think, he talked instead about what they should do. “Wash feet. Give your stuff away. Share your food.

Pray for those who are out to get you. Be the first to say, "I'm sorry." For those who took him as their model, being fully human became a full time job. It became a vocation in itself, no matter what they happened to do for a living.²

In the Joshua story, Joshua is trying to rile up the troupes. Moses had died, and Joshua was the appointed leader. He makes his case by having the people look backwards. Look at what God has done. Because God has provided for you, because God has rescued you, because of all of this tangible evidence, I am asking you to choose this day to serve the Lord. It is a logical argument.

In the gospel of John we have something different going on. The disciples come to Jesus confused about all this talk about the bread of life and how life with the Spirit lasts forever. They are complaining about it, and Jesus challenges them. He basically says that their lives and the choices they will make will get less clear and more confusing as time goes on. We can't always calculate why we should do something. And, if we try to make our decisions based simply on what we see happening in the flesh (i.e., trying to ease pain or disappointment), we will be disappointed most of the time.

Jesus is more concerned with the Spirit. More concerned with kindness. More concerned with what happens between us than what happens to us. This perspective changes the way we do everything. It means acting when we aren't sure how it will turn out. It means living and working with purpose – knowing who we are and to whom we belong. Even those who work alone have an impact on others. I am aware that when I show up here and our grounds are well kept, our offices are neat, and this sanctuary is swept, it is because Joe and Jim have done their

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith*, HarperOne: New York, 2009 , pp. 113-114.

work with skill and care. From the service counter at Verizon to our own homes, every day we choose who and how we will serve.

I recently read a pastor's account of how he was called in the night to be with a family whose infant child was dying. Gathered in the waiting room of a children's hospital was the mother of this baby, as well as an aunt and uncle and some other friends. The doctor had already told them there was nothing left he could do and the child would probably not live through the night. When the pastor came in they gathered in a circle and they all prayed together; everyone was crying. The nurse came out and asked the mother if she wanted to go back and see her baby, Jeremy. She nodded, brushed back her tears, and asked the pastor to come with her. As she moved through the doors, this pastor noticed how the mom's posture changed. She put her shoulders back, she pushed her back and rubbed her face as if she was putting new energy into it. As she approached the basinet she looked calm and peaceful. The nurse placed Jeremy in her arms, and she cuddled him up and looked upon him with all the love in her heart and then she began to sing him lullabies. She held him and sang to him until he took his last breath.

Much later her pastor asked her, "How could you do that? How could you remain so calm and keep singing so beautifully and lovingly even as you knew he was dying?"

"I am his mother," she said.

She knew who she was and to whom she belonged.

Amen.