

Praying Your Confusion

[Psalms 25:4-15](#)

Dr. M. Craig Barnes

Sunday, March 11, 2001

The late theologian John Baille once wrote, ³the part of the road that most needs to be illuminated is the part where it forks.² If you remember being at a fork in the road of life you know exactly what Dr. Baille meant.

Perhaps even today you are at a fork in the road: If you are in college, you have to choose a major. Maybe you should study pre-med. But that would mean taking chemistry, and that would have a dramatic impact on your social life which is on a different fork. Or if you have been dating a person for a long time, you can either make a commitment or agree to stop dating. But you can't just stay in the fork forever. If you have been offered a new job, you can take it or keep the job you have. You bought some time to think about it, but now you have to choose. If you're retired, eventually it occurs to you that you can move to be near the grand kids. But that would be a move away from your friends, church, and the life you have known.

It doesn't matter how old you are, periodically you will find another fork in the road. Each fork only leads to more forks. The choices you are making today are the direct result of the choices you made yesterday. For example, the middle-aged banker is confronting different choices than the middle-aged teacher or the middle-aged parent who decided not to keep working outside the home. It's all because they each made different choices twenty years ago.

We are not unaware of this and so we think long and hard every time we come to a fork in the road. We really want to end life in the right place, but don't know where that place is or what road to take to get there. We are often confused at the forks. In fact, we're more than confused. We are terrified of making a mistake. We think that if we make one wrong choice at one of these forks, we are doomed to land in a place called "Nowhere Special." If the landscape on the road on which we're traveling becomes dreary, we worry, "I made the wrong choice back there, and now look where I'm heading! I have to get off this road. Soon!" This is usually the time people make an appointment with a pastor.

When I listen to them describe their choices, I'm often struck by the wonderful opportunities they have. They could stay home with the kids or keep working. They could take the new job or keep the old one. They could move into the retirement home or keep the big house. "Well, isn't it wonderful," I say, "that you are not a medieval serf worried about the Black Plague?" But most of the time my cheery optimism is not well received. What they want to know is what is the right choice? Or even more importantly, what choice does God want them to make?

This is when I usually shrug my shoulders and, as profoundly as I can, say, "I dunno." It is then that people realize why pastoral counseling is free. But just to drive home the point, I continue, "Do you really think God is up nights worrying about whether you are going to be a fireman or a policeman?"

We are not the first people to ask questions about direction. Thousands of years ago King David wanted to know the same thing when he wrote the 25th Psalm. He begins this psalm, this prayer, as we do. Make me to know your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths. He might as well have said, "Show me the right fork in the road to take."

Now just to be clear, David was not struggling over vocational choices when he wrote this. That was pretty much settled for a king. What he was more concerned about was finding the right paths to God. Lead me in your truth, he continues. And teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all day long. When we scratch off the veneer of our confusion about jobs and relationships, we find that our souls are wrestling with a far more existential confusion: "Why isn't my life working out as I had hoped?" "Am I leaving a legacy that really makes a difference?" "What do I do with all the guilt or hurt I keep lugging around?" Now, we are asking questions that God does worry about a great deal -- questions that in Jesus Christ, he was dying to answer.

Although this is lost on us in translation, the 25th psalm was written as an acrostic with each verse beginning with the next Hebrew letter in alphabetical order. It is as if David were looking for some sense of order in his disordered life. And that is exactly what he finds as he continues to pray: Be mindful of your mercy, O LORD, and of your steadfast love, for they have been from of old. Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me for your goodness¹ sake, O Lord.

In the words of the old Pietists, prayer is a means of taking shelter under the broad folds of a sacred mantle that covers all who bow their heads before God. Surrounded by this loving mantle, you are left with "a peace that passeth understanding." My grandfather used to speak frequently about the peace that passeth understanding. But we don't hear that phrase so much anymore. And that's a shame, because it is exactly what we search for when life is confusing. What we need is a peace that goes beyond understanding since understanding is exactly what we do not have and may not get for a long time. We can live with that confusion, but only if our souls stop churning.

How do we find this cherished peace that passeth understanding? The same way David did. By allowing the Holy Spirit to move our prayers beyond our desires to encounter the desire of God, which is that we remember his steadfast love. Psalm 25 begins with a request for direction, but moves quickly to a soulful renewal under the mantle of God's love. Similarly, we may begin our prayers asking, "What about my job?" or "Where is this relationship going," but if we are listening in prayer, we'll hear the still small voice of the Spirit telling us, "I love you."

If you know that, if you are again convinced that you are loved and forgiven by God, you know that you¹ll be okay no matter what happens. That is because you understand that your life will end up in the right place not because of your good choices, but because of the choice God made to love you. And this love is waiting for you at either fork in the road.

Having been renewed through prayer, in the merciful love of God, David then says, All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness. There is so much freedom in this! God owns all the roads. Option A and option B both belong to God. So you cannot choose your way outside of the love of God.

The choice that God is concerned about most is not about your job options, but about your true calling to look for the grace of God on every road of life. If God wants you to be a butcher, baker, candlestick maker, you're not going to be able to miss it. In the words of C.S. Lewis, God uses all the wrong roads to get us to the right places. If you believe that God owns all the forking roads, and that if out of his gracious love, God has already chosen to lead you to a future filled with hope, then you are free to make the best choices you can without anxiety that your life is on the line every time you choose.

When I was a teenager in youth group, our well meaning leaders would warn us to be sure our choices were always the "perfect will" of God for our lives. "Be sure you pick the right college and job, and marry the right person," they told us. "Be sure you have discerned God's perfect will, because if you miss it, you will be stuck with God's second best for your life." And oh, how we worried about getting second best. We were always panicked about being absolutely certain we knew God's will about everything. Sometimes when people come to my office to fret over their bad choices in life, thinking that they will never make it to the future filled with hope, I wonder if they were in my youth group.

I now realize that second best theology is a heresy. What we teach our kids in this church's youth group is that in Jesus Christ, God has already given us the very best that he had to give. When you receive that gift and believe that in Christ you too are the beloved of God, then you can boldly make choices. If they don't work out well, then make different choices. Because you now believe that God has already made his choice to bring you home on any of these paths.

All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness. Not only does that mean that God owns all the paths, it also means that his love and faithful care will always be found along the way. This frees you to look for the joy of life not in the next place, or by hoping to someday arrive at the right place, but on the road that you are traveling today.

After defeating death, the risen Savior can appear on any road we are walking, often in the places where we least expect him. Like the road to Emmaus, or the road to Damascus, or the road to work. Every time he appears it is to remind you that you are not alone on that road. In the words of Oswald Chambers, "It is this intense reality of expecting Christ at every turn that gives life the attitude of child wonder that he wants us to have."

Why do children enjoy their choices more than adults? Because their world is still filled with wonder. Ugly ducklings can turn into swans. Frogs can become a prince. You don't know you'll have to kiss it to find out. And if their wonder ever turns to confusion, fear, or hurt, they have only to climb up onto a lap to be loved until the hurt is gone. That is what prayer offers -- time in the lap with Abba Father where confusion and hurt is loved away, and the wonder of life restored.

Your calling is not to get to the right place. That is the calling of the Holy Spirit in your life. Your calling is to look for the wondrous things that Jesus is doing on the road you are traveling today. He is the light illuminating every fork in the road.

O God, when we are confused by our choices, give us a vision of the sacred love that journeys with us, that we may always find delight in the path we are on. Amen.