

## ***“Take the high road!”***

**September 24, 2006**

*Text: Mark 9:30-37, James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a*

### I.

Every day in our lives, we have to make choices. We have to choose: Do I exercise today, or put the exercise routine off until tomorrow? Do I eat the hamburger with fries or go with the salad and the grilled chicken? Or perhaps a compromise: a hamburger, without mayo, and with mixed veggies rather than the yummy French fries??

Choices.

Do I spend more time with my spouse and kids? Or continue, full speed ahead at work? Or, better yet, can I work out a balance? Do I call mom or dad ... or go visit them this afternoon? Or do I put it off until next week? Do I put my child in soccer? Have my son take piano lessons? Put my daughter in a tennis class??

Choices.

Do I volunteer at the homeless shelter? Or for some United Way project? Or for a house-building project with Habitat for Humanity? What do I do?

Choices.

Do I take a moral stand on the death penalty? On abortion rights? On human rights for gays and lesbians, for all people? Do I express my protest of the war in Iraq and the neo-conservative leadership coming out of Washington, or, not wanting to ruffle any feathers, do I just keep it all to myself? What do I do? Which road do I go down?

All the time, we gotta choose. **Check it out!**

### II.

An elderly Scottish woman was making her way through the countryside. Each time she came to a crossroads, she would toss a stick into the air. Whichever way the stick came down was the direction she went. At one intersection, however, an old man (who happened to be nearby) saw her toss the stick into the air not once, not twice, but three times before resuming her journey.

The old man was curious. ***Why are you throwing that stick into the air like that?***

She squinted and replied, **I’m letting God direct my journey by using this stick. I just go in the direction God leads me.**

*Then why did you throw the stick three times,* asked the puzzled old man?

**Because,** she said, **the first two times God was pointing me in the wrong direction.**

Again, all the time ... everyday, we have to choose. Where are we going? What are we doing with our lives? Which road should we take?

In **M. Scott Peck's** popular book of the 70's, ***The Road Less Traveled***, we learn that some roads lead to *more of the same* ... they involve little risk. They don't ask much of us. We're never challenged in ways that help us to grow.

While other roads, like *The Road Less Traveled*, lead to personal growth. These roads ask something of us. They nudge us to get out there and take some risks. Again, we have choices to make, everyday ... and over a period of time, these choices add up ... to a life-style, a way of life. At the end of the day, our choices become who we are.

### III.

Our reading from **James** this morning understands this. James talks about *two kinds of wisdom*:

1. the wisdom of the world, that he says is *earthly, unspiritual and devilish* ... and which leads to envy and selfish ambition ... and all sorts of disorder and wickedness.
2. In contrast to this, there's the *wisdom from above*, which is *pure, peaceful, willing to yield, and full of mercy and good fruits*.

We see this wisdom in **the good life that we lead**. James says: ***by your good life, show that your works are done with a gentleness born of wisdom.***

The overarching challenge is to *get close to God* ... to get involved in the world, in community. *Submit yourselves to God*, says **James**. *Resist the devil ... draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.*

Friends, the way we do this, the way we draw near to God and the way God is drawn near to us, is by giving ourselves to God's purposes ... and we do that by aiming for ***the spiritual high ground*** ...

**Take the high road!**

When we take **the high road** ...

- we look for the best in the other person.
- We respect all people.
- We grant all people a sense of personal integrity and human dignity.
- We set a tone that, clearly, has a high moral/ ethical compass.
- Everywhere, we treat people well, seeking to make every person we are with feel special.

When we take the high road, we do what is best for the relationship: for the marriage, the family, the community, the nation, the planet. In other words, on **the high road**, we see the BIG PICTURE.

And therefore, we don't get stuck in the thick mud of self-centeredness ... in greed, in boasting, in taking advantage of the weak and the vulnerable.

#### IV.

The Bible knows that ***taking the high road*** is not a natural impulse. It's not our natural inclination, either, to take *the road less traveled*. Always, in our lives, the values of the world are close at hand, trying to *draw us in*.

1. We see these values all over our consumer-driven culture. In the media ... in advertising ... in our music, our movies, all over the world of entertainment.
2. The values of the world ... tugging us this way or that way ... enticing us to buy this, purchase that ... to be *this way* or *be like that*.
3. Prompting us to look out always for *#1* ... with subtle messages everywhere: *you deserve it*: the new clothes, the new car, the cosmetic surgery, whatever it is. We deserve it.

We have this on-going battle of forces in our spirit: do we value this or do we value that? Do we buy ourselves a new pair of shoes? Or do we make a donation to cancer research? Do we relentlessly feed our impulse for pleasure, or do we feed our spirit? *What do we do?*

About these internal conflicts of the spirit, **James** asks: ***Where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war in you?***

It's as if God is trying to say to us: **Get over yourselves! I LOVE YOU. But your lives are not just about you. Your lives are about your families, your communities, and the environment around you ... to the ends of the earth.**

**Take the high road, not the ME road.**

## V.

Curiously, our gospel reading today, from **Mark**, unveils one of the enduring *paradoxes of Jesus* and points, unmistakably, to the cross—the ultimate symbol of *the high road* for Christians.

The cross invites in us a humble response ... it reminds us of Jesus' commitment to God and to love ... even unto death.

Jesus had been talking to the disciples, in melancholic tones, about his imminent death and resurrection ... and about final meanings. Not long after that, the disciples (most likely James and John) began arguing among themselves about who was the greatest?

It was like: ***Whoa, guys! You're not getting it.*** And then he called them aside and explained to them: ***Whoever wants to be first must be last of all ... and servant of all.***

## VI.

There's an anecdotal story about **George Washington**, our first President, that relates to this notion of *the high road*.

When the Revolutionary War was finally over and America had somehow held on and reigned victorious, King George III of England and his cronies were just certain that **Washington** would have himself crowned ***Emperor of the New World***. After all, that's what any of them would have done.

When the King was told that, on the contrary, Washington planned to surrender his military commission and return to farming at Mt. Vernon, George III was heard to say: ***Well, if he indeed does that, he will be the greatest man in the world.***

And of course, that's precisely what Washington did. There's power in surrendering ourselves to God, to a higher good ... in emptying ourselves of all greed and excess ambition, all self-centeredness and boasting of this or that.

**Take the high road!** Do the right thing! ***By the good life that you live, show the way. Let your light shine before others so that they will see the good that you do and give glory to God.***

## VII.

We have to make choices, friends. Our lives are not dictated by *throwing a stick on the ground before us* or by any pre-ordained determinism of any kind. Every day, every moment, we're free to choose. And the decisions we make have consequences. They matter.

There will always be noises in the wider culture, luring us away from the high road.  
**Take the high road** anyway.

There will always be pressures at work and in the wider world to cut corners here, to fudge a little over there, to lie a little ... in other words, to cheat a little. Turn away from these pressures and **Take the high road** anyway.

There will always be people trying to lure us into their camp: racists, sexists, myopic fundamentalists, homophobics, extremists of all kinds. Pay them no heed and **Take the high road** anyway.

There will always be cynics who put down everything ... who spend all their time whining and complaining. People who don't believe in hope ... who don't believe that people can change, that the world can be redeemed. Don't listen to them and **Take the high road** anyway.

## VIII.

Friends, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ... the God of Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, the God of the universe and all this is ... this God created each of us in God's own image.

Our Holy God breathed the breath of life into us each one, that we might help realize God's purposes. That we might **take the high road**. The road where love, grace and mercy abound. The road where forgiveness and renewal overflow.

**Take the high road**, friends. In all we say and do. In all our coming and our going, **take the high road**.

And let our life be our message to the world, both for God's sake and for our sake, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

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