

Trinity United Methodist Church

May 17, 2020

“Recalculating: Where Do We Go From Here?”

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Welcome and Prayer

Good morning, and welcome to worship this Sunday morning. We're glad you've joined us. We are looking at *Recalculating*, and *Where Do We Go From Here?* Again, welcome.

Would you join me in prayer this morning? Gracious and loving God, we give thanks this day for all your many gifts. We give thanks for the ways in which you continue to lead us and guide us and surround us with your presence. Help us to know what your will is, especially during these trying times, especially as we begin to recalculate as to what life will look like from here on out for us as individuals, as families, and as a church. Indeed, as a nation and a world together. We pray that in the midst of all the reopenings, you would keep us safe and healthy and smart. That you would help us to extend your love and your grace to all that we meet as we begin to move out and about. That we would extend grace to all, no matter what their various decisions, based on going out or not. This is a very complicated time. These are complicated matters. So help us to know your will. Again, give us grace as we work with each other through all of it.

We pray especially for those who continue to succumb to this illness, who continue to lose loved ones to this illness. We also pray for those who have lost loved ones due to other reasons as well. We pray for Jim Stevens and family at the death of Dottie. We pray for Margaret Bachmann and her family at the death of her father. We pray for all of those that we continue to lift on our prayer list. And we pray that you would surround these persons and all that we carry on our hearts and minds with your presence. For all of these things and more, we pray in the name of Christ, who taught us to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Scripture: Acts 16:6-10 (NIV)

6 Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. 7 When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. 8 So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. 9 During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” 10 After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

If you are unfamiliar with our United Methodist appointment processes, that whole process begins in earnest every late December or early January, when every church pastor and Staff Parish Relations Committee meets together to discern God’s will to them as to whether the pastor should return for another year or whether a move should be requested, or some other various option. And so the pastor gets to decide, yes, I’d like to stay; no, I’d like to leave for various reasons, and there’s a couple of options in between; would like to stay but willing to move; would like to move but willing to stay. And the Staff Parish Relations Committee gets those same options.

All this to say, a great deal of prayer goes into these decisions. Some number of years ago, I guess it was in the very beginning of 2012, the December before that my wife and I had been praying about whether we felt called to remain in that present appointment or to request a move. We got lost in all the “what-ifs” that I preached about in our sermon series about anxiety; “What if” this, and “what if” that, and so on. I finally said, no. All things considered as they are, do we feel called to stay or to move on? And we ultimately decided that we felt called to stay. But all the way back to that prior summer, I had this nagging feeling in the back of my mind—that’s what I chalked it up to—that I wasn’t going to be in that appointment for much longer. And that feeling got stronger and stronger and stronger as we headed into the end of the year and into that appointment meeting. To the point that, even though I checked the top option, “yes, I would like to stay,” and the committee had said the same—we fill out the same form together to send on to the district superintendent and to the bishop—as I slid that piece of paper across the table to the Staff Parish Chair for his signature, I heard in a voice that was not my own, that no one else at the table—I actually looked around to see if anybody had said it—I heard, “No. You’re moving.”

A few days later Bekah woke up. She looked at me and she said, “I had one of those really, really vivid dreams last night that we were moving.” I said, “Funny you should mention that, because this was my experience a few nights ago that I was too chicken to really tell you about.” Because, let’s face it, packing up and moving isn’t fun on a family. And, sure enough, the district superintendent, who was Reverend Cho at that point, who became Bishop Cho, called me a week or two later and said, “We would like you to go to Charlottesville and do this church plant.” So God was fairly clearly leading in that situation.

This new sermon series is talking about *Recalculating*. What does it mean when our world has been turned upside down, but we’re still headed in the same general direction? We’re still raising children, some of us are still employed in the same careers, we still have the same life goals in general, and so forth and so on. But the path to there has been very much disrupted. So how do we recalculate from here, like GPS systems used to say?

And last week we pointed out that for followers of Jesus, we have a built-in guidance system. That’s the Holy Spirit. It’s God who, as Proverbs says, we can make our plans, but the Lord ultimately directs our steps. And last week we talked about how we need to tune in to God’s voice, to God’s leading. Oh, if it were as easy as pushing a button like we do on our playlist or on a TV remote, or something like that. But instead we need to work at tuning in in our prayer life.

And you might have wondered after last week, and you might have wondered previously, how does God speak? How do I know it’s God speaking? How do I know it’s God leading and not something else? God speaks and God leads through a number of ways. One of the ways is through other people. It’s where in the Bible we see the roles of the prophets, who bring a word from God to particularly those in authority. Usually it’s a word of warning or of judgment. Sometimes it’s a word of encouragement. We call that, in terms of spiritual gifts, the gift of knowledge, where the Holy Spirit gives us a special gift of discernment, where we’re able to discern things of God that others around us might not be able to discern as clearly. And then we share that word with those people.

That is part of what happened in my call story to ordained ministry. Long before it entered into my mind or my consciousness that this is something that God wanted me to do, other people had been telling me over and over and over and over how I was *going to be* a pastor. I said, “No, I’m going to be a high school band director until I make it big as a professional trumpet player, and that’s going to be my path.” “No, you’re going to be a preacher. You’re going to be a pastor.” And I filed them away as nice compliments until finally I heard God speak for myself. I’ll get to that in a moment.

God speaks through other people. God speaks through our conscience. You know, that so-called “angel on the shoulder” when there’s the devil on the other shoulder, tempting us into doing or not doing something. That angel on the other shoulder, that conscience that we think might be just in our minds, for us as followers of Jesus and even not for followers of Jesus, the Holy Spirit can speak in those ways. To remind us of what’s true, what’s right, what’s noble, what’s pure, as Paul writes in Philippians. So the Holy Spirit can speak through our conscience.

God often speaks through various experiences as well, where it’s not necessarily a lightning bolt, it’s not a direct voice of God, but it’s an experience that we have. I’m recalling a few months ago, one of our congregation members shared how she had been in a car accident that she shouldn’t have walked away from at all, but God basically delivered her through that car accident, and it was a way in which God was speaking into her life.

I remember one time that I was struggling with something in life and in ministry. We had friends that we had borrowed jet skis from on Lake Gaston, so I went and was riding the jet ski and sort of praying as I’m cruising along on the lake. I happened to glance behind me and in the spray of the jet ski, I could see a rainbow. And it wasn’t God knocking me upside the head, God speaking directly to me, but through that experience, I got this sense of God speaking to me through the covenant of the rainbow, God’s continued faithfulness, that, “Hey, I’m still faithful, and I’m going to be with you.” No matter which way I turned that jet ski, that rainbow was right there in that same exact spot. God was going to be with me no matter which way I went. God speaks through experiences.

And then, yes, God does speak “audibly.” I put “audibly” in quotes because when I have experienced God speaking, it’s weird, honestly. It sounds like a voice, but at the same time it’s not audible like a voice. It’s often extremely brief. Oftentimes for me, personally, it’s been just, “no,” or “yes,” or “now,” or something like that, that I know is not from me. And as I said in that meeting with the Staff Parish Committee, and I looked around the table and nobody had opened their mouth. Nobody owned up to it or anything. It was God speaking audibly.

When all of these people were telling me I was to go into ordained ministry, it wasn’t until finally I asked God—you’ve heard me tell this story plenty of times—I looked up in my chair in the auditorium in Blackstone, our old Virginia United Methodist Assembly Center. I literally looked up and said, “What’s up? What do you want me to do?” And I heard, “Go into ordained ministry.” Again, I looked around like, *did somebody else say that?* And it was God.

And then sometimes God speaks through visions, which you might think is something that just happened in the Bible, like to characters like Paul, but I've heard many testimonies of God speaking to people in a vision. Another colleague and friend's called to ministry story is that he was awakened in the middle of the night by a person, glowing, that looked like Jesus, standing at the end of their bed, calling him into ministry. He said that it was a very brief encounter. Jesus basically faded into the darkness of his bedroom. So he got up, he went into the kitchen, made himself a sandwich, and ate half of half of the sandwich, so that there were teeth marks there and everything. And then he went into his bedroom, he placed the half-eaten sandwich on his nightstand, and he went back to sleep. And when he woke up in the morning, the half-eaten sandwich was indeed there. He was testing himself to make sure that all wasn't just a dream that he had had; that that vision was for real.

God speaks through all these different ways. And often God speaks in these various ways in tandem, or in combination with each other. God will speak to us internally, and at the same time God will speak to someone else external of us. And the messages that he gives to each individual often, pretty much unbeknownst to each other, God then confirms that it is God speaking in that way. We call that the *inward call* and the *outward call*, and that's important, especially as we struggle with mental health issues these days. And especially as our anxieties are sky-high during this time of pandemic. So for somebody to claim, "God has told me..." Hmm, really? You sure about that? And before we should be ready to say, "God has told me," I can tell you that I have always, any time anybody has been arrogant about it: "God has told me," and "God has a word that He has given through me!" Mmm, I'm not so sure about that. It usually doesn't turn out to be true. Every time that that word of God through that person turns out to be true, they speak of it in humility. They're almost embarrassed to talk about it. It's a weird thing when God speaks to you and God speaks through you. It can be pretty weird, especially if you're not used to it.

But about this inward and outward call, I always remember a pastor. He was an Assembly of God pastor. He said one time that a man had come into his church one Sunday morning before worship. Right before worship was to start, the organ was already playing the prelude, etc., the man walked up front, looked at the pastor and said, "God has given me a word to give to your congregation today." The pastor looked at him and said, "Funny, He didn't tell me that. Have a seat." And he kept the guy quiet until after worship.

So God speaks in all these different ways. What can we learn in our recalculating about how God speaks to Paul in Paul's vision that we read about in Acts chapter 16? First of all, prior to Paul's vision, God had been speaking to him through different experiences. We read, "Paul and his companions traveled throughout the Phrygia and

Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.” Now, you back up a little bit, and Paul and Silas had been traveling in the southern part of what is now modern-day Turkey, and there they met Timothy, who they brought on into their little entourage. And the question was, “Where do we go next?” The natural route for them to have traveled, which most everybody else traveled, the trade routes, was to go directly westward, through the ancient province of Asia. And that is Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, not Asia as in China and that area that we know today. They normally would have probably set out on that route. But they were kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching and presumably going, even, into that province. So where do we go from here?

We’re not told how the Holy Spirit kept them from going, but I imagine that it was one of those instances of so many roadblocks, literally or figuratively, that they discerned the Holy Spirit was saying, “No. Don’t go that way.” So they went the northern route. Maybe God was leading there. And at the top of Asia Minor, the northern province at that time was called Bithynia. So hey, we’re headed north. Bithynia’s there. Let’s go there. But again, the spirit of Jesus said “no” to going there also.

Now keep in mind that most, if not their whole, journey was by foot. They’re traveling for days on end walking these miles upon miles upon miles. Think about Paul and Silas and Timothy. Now Paul pretty much by this point was already committed to Jesus enough—you might say he was already nuts enough—to say, “Yes, Lord, I will go where you lead and will walk until you lead us where we’re going.” Paul was nuts enough to do that. Silas had been around with Paul long enough that maybe Silas had caught on. But can you imagine being Timothy? You just converted to the faith, to the way, to Jesus. This crazy guy Paul had you circumcised and invited you to along on this journey, and now you’re just walking for miles on end. Can you imagine being Timothy? “What did I just get myself into? Where in the heck are we going? What’s the point of all this? Can I just go back home?”

So what did they do, as the Holy Spirit said “no” here, and the spirit of Jesus said “no” here, and by the way, that spirit is one and the same. God kept saying “no.” What did they do? Did they sit down and grumble and complain a while? Did they just mope around? Did they wring their hands? Did they waste time on Facebook? (Of course they didn’t have Facebook back then.)

So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. Mysia was the province they had to travel through on the way to the port city of Troas, on the top edge of the Mediterranean Sea. Lots of ships. And where can you go out of a port city? Where can you go out of a major airport, like Atlanta or Dulles or JFK? You can go just about anywhere.

So after all that time, after all that walking and waiting, they positioned themselves in a place where they were ready to go when God finally said, “yes,” and to wherever God finally said “yes.” And boy, did God say “yes.”

Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia, from over the sea in Greece. Not really all that far away from Troas. It was a place they hadn't been before. It was a place that maybe hadn't even occurred to them in their own thinking, to go there. But yet Paul sees this vision of a man, who says “Come and help us.” Paul must have shared this vision with Silas and Timothy, and maybe they might have said, “Um, Paul, what did you have to eat before bed?” Or, “Maybe you should lay off the video games for a while, Paul, because you're starting to see this stuff in your dreams.” (They didn't have video games then either.) But instead they concluded that God was calling them to preach the gospel in Macedonia, and they got ready to leave at once.

How about you? Have you ever tried pushing ahead to a goal or a destination in life that you have in mind, but it just isn't happening? It's just not working? It could be the adversary working against us, or it could be God. It could be the Holy Spirit saying “no,” or at least, “not yet.” That was my experience in church planting. When I first was exposed to the idea of church planting, I said, “ooh, pick me, pick me,” because church planting looked cool, and I really wanted to get out of the church that I was in at the time. But I wasn't ready. It was “not yet.” And God knew it then, but I didn't. I *couldn't* have admitted it to myself then, that I wasn't ready to go and do a church plant at that point in time.

So when that sort of thing happens to you, when you have that destination in mind but it's just not happening, what do you do? Do you try harder in your own power? How's that working for you? Do you try a workaround? Do you sit and pout? Do you mope about it? Do you waste time on something else?

Instead, what would it mean to position yourself in a place where you can be ready when God says, “Yes, go.” Maybe in the meantime you can improve your health so that you are in top physical shape to go into that mission field, if God leads you there. Wherever, whatever that mission field might be. Maybe it's to work on your finances and to kick some debt so that you're more nimble financially to be able to go wherever God says “go.” Maybe it's to better yourself in some way, like to work on your education in some way or another. To learn a new skill. Maybe it's an opportunity to work on existing relationships that you already have around you, and that is your mission field for the time being.

As we think about all this recalculating, I think the question on all of our minds is, *Where in the heck are we going with all of this?* Is baseball as we knew it ever going to come back? (I'm wondering that.) Will we ever be able to gather in large crowds again?

You see, I think many of us are simply expecting, and really hoping, that we'll just be able to go back to normal. We'll be able to just go home, because we're tired of this walking in a wilderness. But friends, what if that's not where God is leading? In fact, has God *ever* led there? Maybe God is using this time to show us how broken normal had become. How far from His will we had gone, trying to forge our own way under our own power. Because let's face it, as this weekend we talk about reopening and what that looks like, we're really talking about regaining *comfort*. Regaining what we're used to that brings us comfort. And again, is that *ever* where God leads?

I'm not saying what part of reopening is right or wrong. I'm just using that as an example that we might apply to our lives personally. What is it that we are really longing for in our recalculating? Is it to simply go back to where we were? Or is it really to seek God's guidance and God's will as we move *forward* from here together?

As we recalculate, how is God leading *us* to Troas? How is God leading us to that place and that position where we are ready to go when God says "yes, go?" For all the ways that God speaks, for all the ways that the Spirit leads, it starts in the foundation of prayer.

And as we close, I remind you of our theme verse for the year—man, is it appropriate. God knew what He was doing when He led us to this. Matthew 6:33: **Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you as well.**

Many of you have been asking and wondering: "The governor says churches can reopen. What about us?" I remind you that we are under the bishop's authority, and she has this week issued guidelines that we will begin looking at, that we will begin to work on as a team, as church leaders together. So please be patient with us as we work through that material. I'm sorry that I haven't maybe been as communicative about such things as I could have been, but honestly there hasn't been a whole lot to share in these last weeks. So now that things are beginning to roll, we will get out the information in as timely a manner as we can to you. So stay tuned. Stay in prayer as we seek the ways that God is recalculating and the ways that God is leading us to that place where church may not be the way it was again, but we're in a place where we're ready to *go* as a church, as families, as individuals, when God says, "yes. That's where we're headed." That's where I want to be. How about you?

Thanks be to God. Amen.