

Tracy Daub
9/23/18—University Presbyterian Church
Psalm 1

DIVERGENT ROADS

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood." That is the opening line to the poem *The Road Not Taken*, by the celebrated American poet Robert Frost. Frost writes, "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood/ and sorry I could not travel both/ And be one traveler, long I stood/ And looked down one as far as I could/ To where it bent in the undergrowth." The poem is about the many forks in the road we all come to in life: the moments in life when we have to decide which direction we will take. These forks arise daily, in the small everyday choices we make. And they arise also in the larger, more major choices we must make: when you receive two job offers and have to decide which one will you take. Whether to major in biology or art history. Whether to accept the marriage proposal or not. To tell your superiors about a colleague's inappropriate behavior or not. Which course of treatment to pursue for your cancer. You can only travel one road. And so you have to make a choice.

These choices also arise in the moral and spiritual dilemmas we face. Do you report on your tax returns that extra undocumented income you received? What path will you take when confronted with your personal temptations of food, alcohol, sex, or shopping? Should you contribute financially to the church or other charities when you can list so many ways the money would be useful to you if you kept it? Will you forgive the person who wronged you or hold on to the hurt?

Every day, we are confronted with these divergent roads, both externally as well as in our internal moral, spiritual, and ethical lives. And the shape of our lives is determined by the choices we make regarding which path we follow.

The writer of Psalm 1 raises this issue of what path we should follow, what direction we should take in life. This writer speaks of two divergent pathways: the path of the wicked and the path of the righteous. We are warned to “not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread.”

Now my radar goes up whenever people start labeling one another as "wicked" and set themselves up as examples of "righteous" living. All kinds of hurt has been perpetrated by those who name-call. And yet, the writer is making an accurate observation. We can easily see evidence of wickedness in the world. There are indeed wrong and harmful and destructive pathways people follow: those that spiral downward into self-destructive behaviors and those that spiral upward into corruption and the misuse of power. The writer warns us against such pathways. Instead, we are encouraged to follow the path of the righteous.

But what exactly is the path of the righteous? Figuring that out is not easy. We may think it is easier to identify the path of the wicked. And yet, even that is not so simple. Discerning between the two pathways is not always as easy as looking upon two roads diverging in a wood. Evil doesn't just show up in a devil's costume. Rarely do most of us sit down and knowingly decide that we are going to take the path of evil and self-destruction. Usually, the pathways that lead us away from God and toward destruction, usually these pathways are harder for us to distinguish. They get mixed up in the ordinariness of life. They seem harmless at first and so we don't see the danger in

where they may lead us. And so we tread the pathway to the shopping mall to fill our homes and closets with more and more, without a thought that we are heading down a dangerous road. We tread the pathway to the refrigerator to eat when we are not even hungry. We tread the pathway to the TV or the computer to numb our minds when we are tired and bored. We tread the pathway to the liquor cabinet to get a fix in order to deal with life's problems. We become habituated to speaking in unkind ways, and pretty soon a pathway has been laid down that we tread over and over again. We grow accustomed to complaining and negativity. And we create well worn pathways in our hearts and minds and souls that lead us farther and farther down a road that takes us away from God and the source of our well-being.

At first glance, the writer of our psalm makes it seem like taking the *right* path in life is an easy and clear choice. Just take the right one and not the bad. Of course it's rarely that easy. In fact, our writer seems to recognize this because according to the psalm, the main difference between the righteous and the wicked is not that the righteous are somehow better people or more adept at avoiding the wrong paths in life, but that the righteous "meditate" on God's law with great regularity--we are told "day and night." They turn again and again to God's law as a guide, as a map, to help them chart which directions to take in life.

Now, typically when we hear the term "God's law" we may think about rules and regulations: don't do this, don't do that. But what is fundamentally meant by God's law is really the message contained in the scriptures. And the core of the message is this: God loves you. God loves you. And God calls you and me to live understanding that love and reflecting that love.

The key difference, according to the writer of our psalm, the key difference between the righteous and the wicked is that the righteous meditate on this message: they study and reflect and stay attentive to the message that God loves them and calls them to live understanding that love and reflecting that love. And thus, by meditating on this law, this truth--God loves them and calls them to love others--they can attempt to find the righteous path in life. And it will affect how they treat themselves and their bodies and their minds, and their souls. And meditating on this truth will affect how they treat others--with kindness, working for justice, showing compassion, extending forgiveness, being generous. Meditating on God's law will direct the paths they take.

When asked why people go to church or send their kids to church, a lot of people will answer that they believe church will help them have better morals. They want themselves and their children to walk a good and right path in life and they think church can help with that. And hopefully that might be true. But there are a lot of worthy organizations in our society that also help reinforce good morals. What the Christian church is supposed to do is something more profound than teaching good morals. Good morals are not the goal but rather are the by-product of what comes from really understanding the law of God, the truth of God, the message of God. God is love. And God creates us to be people of love. Walking the right path in life begins when we understand who God is and who God creates us to be.

That is what happens at baptism. Baptism is supposed to usher us all on a certain path in life. And that starts with what we affirm at baptism. We affirm whose we are: we are children of a loving, merciful God. And we affirm who we are: those called to follow Jesus on the path of love. This path we walk because of our baptism is based on our

understanding that identity: of who God is and who we are. And when we understand that identity, well then, our path will include generosity, forgiveness, compassion, honesty, justice, gratitude, joy, and love. We don't head down life's path with a list of things we are supposed to do or be: generous, loving, honest, kind, etc. Rather, as people of faith, as those who meditate on the law of God, we start with an awareness of who God is, and then we walk that path *with* God. God is just. So will our path be in life. God is compassionate. so will our path be in life. God is forgiving. So will we be in our walk in life. God is generous. So will our path be marked by generosity.

We know this because we meditate on the law of God. That's what we do here together each Sunday. We meditate on the truth of who God is and who we are *because* of who God is. We pray, we study scripture, we support one another and share our stories with one another, and that is how we attempt to find the pathways of righteous living.

Divergent impulses exist inside us all the time. The hope we have of ever walking the right pathways in life does not come through our own strength or efforts, or through a sense of our moral superiority. The hope we have of walking the right pathways in life comes from knowing something essential, something essential we have learned by meditating, and studying, and discussing, and contemplating on God's word. We know that we belong to the God of love. And that fundamental piece of God's identity and our identity helps us find our way.