

“Who is following who?”
Genesis 12:1-9 Matthew 9:9-13; 18-26

This past Wednesday afternoon there was an accident and explosion on the I-75 overpass of Route 301 that has caused major disruptions in getting from one place to another in our community. Having said that and before going further we need to pause and agree to include in our prayers the drivers who were involved, an electrician on his way home and the 54 year old driver of the tanker who swerved to avoid hitting the pickup truck and in doing so incurred burns over 90% of his body and is in critical condition at the burn center at Tampa General Hospital. His instinctive swerving probably saved the life of the man in the pick up truck at a huge personal cost to himself.

I, along with most of you, have been inconvenienced and had my patience tried by the traffic congestion that has resulted from this accident. But as people who gather to worship, as people who presume to call ourselves Christians, and as people who are also called to be disciples of Jesus Christ, Lord have mercy on us all, if we focus only on our own sense of convenience in getting from one place to another. I am certain that there are at least two men, both drivers involved, and all of their families and loved ones who would be very grateful to be sitting in traffic than in the waiting room of a hospital or dealing with all the “what if” questions that may be nagging their consciences at the moment.

That said, both of our scriptures this morning have to do with getting from one place to another. In the last several days I dare say most of us have given very conscious thought to the routes we have chosen to take to get to where we were trying to go. This morning’s scriptures both represent a very strong encouragement for each of us individually and as a church to be conscious about where we are, where we are going, and how we are going to get there.

The Administrative Assistant of our church lives out toward Parrish. On Thursday morning it took her several hours to get into work and on Thursday afternoon I heard her discussing with her husband all the possible routes to get home. He was in Sarasota. She was here in Palmetto, and fortunately they have lived here for a number of years. I heard her mention several routes like the Rye River Road Bridge (?) that I had never heard of. But they both had a common sense of geography so they could communicate with no problem.

I thought of that in relationship with our spiritual journey and both these passages of scripture. I just finished reading a book called “Simply Christian.”¹ One of the things that I found helpful is that one reason much of our talk about religion and spirituality and what it means to be a Christian gets easily muddled is because we do not share a common geography. The author suggested that there are basically three options in how to think about heaven and earth.

¹ Simply Christian (Why Christianity Makes Sense) by N T Wright, Harper Collins, 2006.

1. The first is that heaven and earth are the same thing and that God is in all things. This is called pantheism. The appeal of this option is that it recognizes the sacredness of all life, but a shortcoming is that it fails to recognize the reality of evil and the significance of suffering. This option has the appeal of recognizing the grace of God in all things but it falls short in that it does not recognize the vital role of the will. In other words this perspective would say that Christ is as much in a blade of grass or a cockroach as in a new born baby. There's something not quite right there.
2. The second option for a spiritual geography is that heaven and earth are completely separate. Heaven is up there and earth is down here, and one really doesn't have much to do with the other. This option is called Deism. I think there are a lot of times when we subscribe to this option. In the first church I served in North Florida I had a church member who told me what a lot of us believe, I think. I need to preface this by saying that he was one of the most diligent, hardest working men I have ever met. He was a great neighbor. We were talking one day and he said, "Preacher, the way I look at it is this. God is up in heaven taking care of things, and he put me down here to take care of things. So, as long as he'll let me I'm going to stay down here and take care of things and when I get up there I'll let him take care of me." Now there is a lot of appeal to that option. It feels quite orderly. It honors the importance of human responsibility, but it also falls short as well. There is an innate distancing and lack of relationship. In this second option the relationship between God and humans is that God gives us rules and we are supposed to obey them. When we obey them things go well, if not here at least eventually when we get up to where God is really in charge. When we disobey them then we suffer the consequences, if not now then at least eventually. In option two God has designed heaven and earth so that they will always be separate and we need to be made perfect to get from here to there and since none of us is capable of that God came up with the plan to send his Son to somehow satisfy God's need for someone to pay for all this evil, all this disobedience down here and make it possible for us to get up there to heaven to be with God. But there is a third option.
3. The third option recognizes that heaven and earth are not the same. It still claims that God created both heaven and earth and called it all good. It also recognizes that evil exists, that suffering is real, and that we have choices to make and those choices make a real difference. This option takes the perspective that although heaven and earth are distinct, they are also very close. In fact, in very specific ways they overlap and intersect and in fact are interlocked with each other. And what we know by revelation and by God's word is that God's desire is for heaven and earth to be made one. That is why every week we pray "thy will be done on earth as in heaven." Sacred places are where heaven and earth intersect. Jesus claimed that he is the intersection of God and humanity.

Remember in the gospel when he proclaimed that the kingdom of God has come near? That is what he was talking about.

Last week Christine preached a very helpful sermon about what the story of Noah tells us about the relationship between God and humankind. She described the nature of the relationship as a covenant relationship and the point she beautifully made in her sermon is that one of the things that characterizes a covenant relationship is that all parties are willing to be changed by the other, and that includes God. I cannot imagine a God who is willing to be changed on our behalf, but even though I cannot imagine it, I am willing to worship such a God.

And out of that mutual relationship God makes promises. God went to Abram, a man who was as good as dead, who was married to a wife who had not given him any heirs, and who just wanted to live out his days in relative peace. God said to Abram “I want to bless you so that you will be a blessing to all nations” but in order for you to live into this blessing you must leave this place of comfort and familiarity and go to a place where you have never been before. When Abram obeyed God it was not an obedience to a God who was distant and removed. By his obedience Abram was aligning himself with God who was by his side. God took Abram outside and showed him the stars; God didn’t say “I am up here in the stars” God showed him the stars. The land of promise that God spoke of to Abram was a place where Abram and all his descendants could experience the abundance of living in relationship with God. The obedience of Abram was by faith and nothing else. Everything else was sheer grace, and the intention of God is clear, that heaven and earth will continue to be made one.

In the Gospel lesson we hear of Jesus calling Matthew to follow him. Jesus found Matthew sitting in the tax booth. We have no indication that Matthew was any better or any worse than any other tax collector, but the best on them in Jesus time was still thought of as a tax collector. These days it is quite popular to group, say all attorneys and all politicians in the same bag – nothing either fair or accurate about that, but resentments are never worry about being fair or accurate. Suffice it to say that it was not unusual to speak ill of all tax collectors. That didn’t seem to bother Jesus at all.

In fact, Jesus didn’t seem to be very selective at all in who he called. The difference is in how those he called responded. Many did not go well. We know of at least three.² One guy responded by bragging to Jesus, “I will follow you wherever you go.” Jesus proverbially throws cold water in his face by calling his bluff and telling him that he has nothing to offer him for even foxes and birds will have it better than him. Another responds to Jesus by saying “Lord, I will follow you but I just need to go home and take care of a few things first like burying my father.” Jesus calls his bluff as well.

² Luke 9:57-62

As a tax collector Matthew would have been very familiar with the way power and influence worked in this world. He would have known the pressure from those over him to meet his quotas. He would have been very familiar with all kinds of tactics in how to exert pressure on others.

When you read the gospels you may notice that no one ever got to be a disciple of Jesus by volunteering. In John 15:16 Jesus says, "You did not choose me but I chose you." Us Americans are liable to get our democratic nose out of joint, "What do you mean that I don't get to choose?" to which the response is "Where do you think the desire to seek God comes from in the first place anyhow?" The response of faith is that the Spirit of God places that hunger and desire that is Christ's invitation within each of us.

The most precious thing each one of us has is the power to speak for ourselves and say "I." The power of "I." The power of I to step forward. The power to say, "I will". The power to say "I am". The power to say "I do."

There are so many ways to dilute and waste that power. We say, "I will when I get around it, when it is convenient" "I really ought to, but you know" We dilute that power when we compare ourselves with others, that is what the Pharisees were doing when they were keeping an eye on Jesus – notice they watched him but wouldn't talk to him, they got some of his disciples in a corner to talk about Jesus, but Jesus just didn't put up with that kind of foolishness – he confronted it directly with truth and love.

Chosenness followed by I-ness. I am. I will. I do. And the only time we can ever make that response is NOW. God's chosenness is always now. God's invitation is always now. It is never in the past. I should have. If I would have known now what I know now. If I could have only. It is never in the future. When things are going better. When I can get my ducks in a row. The only time we can ever respond is now, the eternal present.

We have no indication that Matthew was any better than any one else – he was probably just a flawed, as much of a fake, just as sinful as anyone else. None of us is chosen because we are gifted or good. We are chosen because we are loved.

Where are we? Who are we? We are all sinful people who have been chosen in God's love. Where are we going? We are called to be a part of God's people that place ourselves at God's disposal in increasing the overlap and intersection between heaven and earth. How do we get there? We follow Jesus.

Now some of you may say, "I have no idea how to follow Jesus." We get two real good clues in this gospel lesson. First, look to see who else is following Jesus. Second, look to see who Jesus is following. Who do we see? We don't see either perfect or ideal people. We see a woman with a great need and great faith

and Jesus doesn't look past her. He sees her and declares that her faith has made her well. Jesus is following a former critic, a leader of the synagogue who has suffered a great loss. Jesus endures the scoffing and derision of the crowd to take the hand of one who has been given up as lost.

Where are you?

Where are you going?

How are you going to get there?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Rev Stephen Hoffman

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First United Methodist Church of Palmetto