

1

How many of you have ever faced an intersection and wondered which way to go? I imagine each one of us has faced a time in life when we just can't decide which way to go. We may feel as though we have reached a signpost that points in multiple directions (as shown on bulletin), each path seeming as interesting—or confusing—as any other path. Sometimes we may just stand there, unable to choose a direction, frozen in time, pondering what to do. Or we may select a path without thinking about its direction, and only later regretting the path we have chosen and wishing we could turn around. Some of us may actually turn around, head back to where we were, and take another path.

Some paths we have control over, such as what school to attend upon graduation from high school, whom to marry, what to name our children, or what to eat for supper. We like to believe we have absolute freedom and choice, but there are some paths that we get very little choice about: who will

be our parents, in what country we are born, and even in what religion we are raised.

And as Earth Day has reminded us, although we did not have a choice to be born on this planet, we do have a choice in how to care for it. We can make simple choices, such as recycling aluminum cans or glass or paper rather than throwing them away. We have a choice whether to make five trips into town or combine our errands into one trip to conserve natural resources. We have a choice whether we leave the cell phone chargers plugged into the wall while we are gone all day or to unplug them when they are not charging. Each little choice helps keep our resources and our planet around for our grandchildren and their grandchildren, giving them the opportunity to follow a multitude of paths in their lives.

In the cases where we can choose which way to go, we may find ourselves changing our paths later in life, such as changing our country or state of residence or what religion to follow. And when

2

making these choices, some may feel so sure of a decision that they believe others need to follow the same path they have chosen. That can be a good thing when it instills in us a passion to joyously tell others about our experiences, but sometimes it can have traumatic consequences when some try to force their ideas on others.

We see a glimpse of both attitudes in the story in the Book of Acts. Peter and John were so passionate about what they had experienced in their encounter with Jesus that they were in the streets telling about the resurrection. Lots of people were persuaded and joined the movement.

Some religious leaders, however, were not so supportive, for the idea of resurrection was controversial. Some religious leaders believed in the idea, but others did not. That's why we often see various religious groups arguing in the Bible. (How about that—we still like to argue today, don't we?)

Some leaders decided to assert their power and have Peter and John arrested, and they brought

them to trial to investigate their actions a bit closer. The investigators asked, "By what power or what authority did you do this?"

*Do what?* you may be wondering. To understand that question, we have to back up to the previous chapter. There we learn that Peter and John had encountered a man who could not walk, and they offered him healing in the name of Jesus. The man was so joyful that he jumped up and went into the temple singing and praising God.

You can just imagine the questions that arose. *Who gave that man permission to start jumping around and singing here in the midst of our orderly worship? Wasn't he the man sitting outside who could not walk? How did he get healed?* Just imagine if someone who had been helped by one of us came running into the middle of worship, singing and praising God. We too might feel a bit uncomfortable, wondering what was going on!

During the trial to discover what had happened, I imagine Peter got a bit irritated. Here they were,

3

trying to help someone in need, and now they have been arrested! Even today, sometimes people get into trouble when they try and help someone else, and we may feel a bit reluctant to help someone, fearing that we may get sued if something goes wrong.

Peter had just had enough. “You want to know why we did this?” And then he quotes scripture from a beloved psalm: “Because the stone you rejected is now the cornerstone.” By this time the room was feeling very tense, but Peter keeps pushing the buttons of confrontation: “There is salvation in no one else!”

Although today’s reading from the Book of Acts ends here, what do you imagine could have happened next? ...

It’s amazing that this heated discussion didn’t blow up, but when the leaders saw Peter’s boldness *and* the man who had been healed, they let them all go—with a warning to not make a scene.

The story seems to end with a choice: which path will you follow? There are some today who have chosen to follow the path of Jesus, and in doing so, some attempt to use this particular story in the book of Acts to convince others to follow their same path. They point to the words, “there is no other salvation” as a way to pressure others to make the same choice, arguing that those who follow God through other religious traditions don’t get salvation. For us Christians, Jesus is our assurance of salvation, of God’s loving embrace in this world and the next. But can we limit God’s work in the world only to what we know?

Arun Gandhi, the grandson of the famous Mahatma Gandhi, spoke last weekend at the Shrine about what his grandfather used to say. “We should engage in a friendly reading of one another’s scriptures in order to know them better.” Rather than trying to change one another to follow our own paths, he suggested we could instead learn to appreciate the path each person travels. He then

④

told a parable that his grandfather loved to tell about several blind men who had never seen an elephant but tried to describe it based on touching it.

The man who was feeling the side of the elephant said, “An elephant is big and wide, like a wall.”

The one feeling the trunk said, “No, it’s more like a hose.”

“No,” said the man holding onto a leg. “An elephant is more like a pillar.”

Finally the one holding the tail said, “You are all wrong. An elephant is more like a rope.”

Gandhi used this story to illustrate how the many religions in the world try to describe God. We each get a portion of the truth, and we are each correct in our understanding, but our perspectives are limited. None of us can see the whole picture.

Mark Heim, an evangelical theologian, struggled with the exclusive claims of the Christian faith,

knowing the reality of the many world religions that exist. How can we say that Jesus is the only means of salvation in light of the many religions claiming they also know God? In his book *Salvations*, the author agrees that for Christians, Jesus is the only means of salvation. But that doesn’t exclude what other religions proclaim as well. Buddhists speak of nirvana and Hindus of moksha, and Jews and Muslims may have different visions of heaven, but we all speak about God’s gracious care for us in this world and the next.

It could be that we are all trying to describe the “elephant” with our limited sight. We all have a vision of a portion of the truth— something we should dance and sing about in joyous celebration, just as the man did when Peter and John helped him to walk. Someone has helped us walk along the path of faith, so may we continue to help others join that adventure, while celebrating the many ways that God embraces all of creation.