

“Walking the Road,” February 22, 2009

Several years ago, a guy I knew told me he really wanted to live in Florida, and with all the snow recently, we can certainly understand why! He talked about this every time I saw him, but I was never able to see anything to indicate that he was moving toward that goal. It was all talk, or so it seemed.

However, two or three years after this first came up, he announced to me that he was actually moving to Florida at the end of that year. I asked him if that was for sure, and he assured me it was. “I’ve discovered,” he said to me, “that if you really, really want something to happen, you have to make a plan and execute it. I’ve made a plan, and I’m executing it. I’ll be gone by year’s end,” he said. And he was.

While deciding to change where he lived was an important decision, it’s probably not the most important decision any of us ever make. In the course of life, we take one course or another; we choose additional education, or not; we follow a certain line or work, or not; we choose to live our lives single, or not. There are significant decisions that all of us make, perhaps without even being aware of it, that chart the course of our lives.

Even if we haven’t consciously made any sort of decision about some of those life-shaping events, the very nature of our not proactively choosing a course means we have chosen one—a life that tends to be floating free, with no picture of where we’re headed, no outline of the kind of life we actually want to live. Not deciding is, after all, a decision of a different sort.

Somehow, I don’t believe that’s the way God wants us to live our lives. Throughout our faith story, there are countless indications that God wants us to have a life that full, that’s meaningful and purposeful. While God wants us to have a joy-filled life, living solely for selfish interests and selfish pleasure don’t seem to me to part of what God is asking from us.

Our Bible passage for today—one we’ve used often—gives us a strong sense of how God wants us to live our lives. This passage of Paul’s writing says this: **“Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that. Don’t be impressed with yourself. Don’t compare yourself with others. Each of you must take responsibility for doing the creative best you can with your own life.”**

This seems pretty pointed to me. We’re not on this earth just to exist, but to live—really live. Part of our mission is to discover who we really are, and from that to identify what it is that calls forth from us our best talents. Then we are to throw ourselves into that kind of life, that kind of work. We have all the possibilities within our grasp; it is up to us to reach out and grab onto them. It is our responsibility.

“OK, “ you might be thinking, “just how do we begin to do that?” I’m so glad you asked, because there are those who have some ideas about what that might look like, so I’ve gathered a collection of thoughts and ideas from others, and thrown in a few of my own perspectives, and for whatever it’s worth, I’d like to share them with you.

Starting where Paul began in the Bible passage is a good launching pad. Who are we? What are our best traits? Can we name our highest values? What are the things we do well? What do we enjoy more than anything else? When is it that our hearts sing with joy? When we can begin to get a grasp on that part of ourselves, we’ve begun to take the first step.

Actually, this is reminiscent to me of all the work Richard Bolles has done over the years with his editions of *What Color is Your Parachute?* I suspect some of you might be familiar with his work. I know that this book played an important role in the path my life has taken. As a little side note, it was only after I used his materials that I discovered how sound theologically the work was. You see, it turns out that Bolles is an ordained pastor, and so his concepts of a life’s work really resonated with me then, and they still do today.

At any rate, years ago, I worked my way through one of his early publications, and began to narrow the field to identify how my life was supposed to be spent. One of the first exercises the book asked its readers to do was to write about an accomplishment of which we were proud, and then to try to determine what commonalities were imbedded in that experience. Then we were led toward identifying some of the things we knew how to do reasonably well, and liked to do. The next step was to think about subject matter that interested us, and then the kinds of environments and people with whom we liked to surround ourselves.

In my own experience, it was after working through those phases of self discovery that it became more evident to me that somehow I wanted to be involved with spirituality. At that point, I didn’t have the words to explain it, or know exactly what that might look like, but I had at least identified the ball park in which I wanted to be. Somehow that seemed to be, as the Bible passage says, the work I’d been given, but now what?

As with any new venture, we have to learn more, discover more to see in a clearer way what our future might be. In my case, I began talking to folks who were involved in some kind of church work, since that was the only way I knew how to pursue this notion. What was it like to live this kind of life? What kind of education was required? What were the possibilities?

Those weren’t just questions I needed to explore, but I believe they are important steps in the process for each of us. Once we have a sense of what, for lack of a better way to put it, God is calling us to, then we begin to have a picture, a vision, but it’s not always very clear. Other people, family, friends, those living a certain path—all of those resources can begin to share and start to paint the picture. For me, it was out of those kinds of things that I began to glimpse a vision of a future that I had never considered or dreamed possible.

In a very real way, what I'm talking about is the desire many of us have to define more clearly our life path. What is it that we're about? What is our purpose in being?

That's really the process of identifying our life mission, perhaps even by crafting our personal mission statement. Some of you may be familiar with the work of author Laurie Beth Jones, and particularly with her work entitled *The Path, Cratinv Your Mission Statement for Work and for Life*. In fact, several years ago, a Gardener offered some workshops that some of you may have participated in; during those sessions, individuals were guided through a process of writing their own personal mission statement.

I have gone through such a process, and have my own statement. While it doesn't identify the exact work that is mine on this earth, it does serve to unveil the overriding principle that guides my life, and needs to permeate every piece of my living. If you haven't been through such an experience, I highly encourage each of us to do so; it can be very revealing, can keep us focused, and can give our lives more meaning. If you're interested, we might even be able to offer some sessions like the ones I mentioned earlier. Just let us know.

However, any time we're walking along our life path, even if we're convinced this is where we're supposed to be, there are times of reassessment and re-evaluation. We ask ourselves questions like, "Is this really right? Are we staying true to the path we've chosen to take? By living this kind of life, how are we feeling about ourselves?" Those questions are gauges into our souls, and help us stay true to ourselves, and live with integrity.

Even after beginning to know ourselves and discovering who we are, even after we begin to get a vision of what our lives might be like, there's something more. We really do have to set a plan to live that kind of life. Like the person I mentioned at the beginning—if the goal was for him to live in Florida, then he had to make plans to do so, determining the steps he had to take to accomplish that plan, and then he had to execute those steps.

In other words, we have to take action. Thinking we want to be a certain kind of person or live a certain kind of life is nice, but it doesn't get us anywhere unless it's accompanied by action that moves us toward our desired end. The humorist Will Rogers hit the nail on the head when he said, "**Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there.**" It's really about walking the walk, taking the road that will lead us where we want to go. To do that, we have to take the first step. As a Chinese proverb advises, "**A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.**"

It's risky to take that first step. What if we make a mistake? What if we fail? What if it's really not the right thing? We ask ourselves all kinds of questions that reflect the fear that so often holds us back from living our best life. Nonetheless, we will never know, we will never grow, we will never learn until we take that first step.

Then and only then are we walking the road, and beginning to navigate our life journey, and while we'd loved to have a GPS with our exact destination in mind, that's not very likely on this kind of life journey. My life experience tells me that much of our journey remains shrouded in mystery; often it's only in retrospect that we can really define the path we were actually on, even though we thought we had a clear end in mind. That is the nature of life.

And, for sure, even the best-laid plans often go awry. There are always detours and side trips. If you've been around The Garden for any time, you may have heard me say that I don't believe there's any such thing as a wasted experience. I don't believe that the twists and turns we may encounter in life are serendipitous, even though it may seem so. There is much to be gained in the course of our journey, and even if timing doesn't quite work out as we planned, we may discover a depth or richness that we might otherwise have missed. We just continue to build on the foundation of our dream, our vision, and step by step, we start walking down the road.

You see, the road I'm talking about has to do with every facet of our lives. Yes, certainly, it can apply to our career and work life, and it can have major implications for our families and friends, but mostly it's about us—it's about the people we become as we journey through life. Are we people who seize the opportunities that come before us to touch in a positive way the lives of others? Are we people who embody God's love in a way that, even without knowing the words to describe it, others see and experience it? Are we people who by the very road we travel make this world a better place for us all?

It's up to us, because we make the road by walking it; we make our lives by living them, day after day after day.

Closing:

The pioneer in the study of death and dying, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross once said, "**It is only when we truly know and understand that we have a limited time on earth, and that we have no way of knowing when our time is up, that we will begin to live each day to the fullest; as if it was the only one we had.**"

It's not just about making a living, it's about making a life—the life we live every day on this earth. As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray we'll reflect on the life we're living, the road we're walking, and make sure it's how God would have us live.

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.

