

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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The Narrow and Winding Way to Life

'Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it. – Matthew 7:13-14

Thank you to Bob for sharing his experience of pilgrimage with us. I thought I would build a little on his presentation by sharing a little about some different understandings of spiritual journeys, because the metaphor of “journey” is a very important one in the Bible and in the Christian tradition.

Some of those who knock on your doors and invite you to join their churches believe that Christian commitment means to conform to a set of beliefs, or a standard of behaviour, or to a set of practices, or to all of the above. They believe that being a Christian is simple, straightforward, and predictable. Once you are found, they teach, you will never be lost again. The earliest Christians, however, referred to their faith, not as a religion or belief system, but as “the Way” of Jesus.¹ The Way was not something you believed, but a path you walked, a journey you embark on, a voyage on which you set sail. Jesus himself used the language of journey often when he talked about the life of faith. And the thing about any journey worthy of the name is that it begins with a single step, but what lies a few steps ahead might be very difficult to predict, and what lies a million steps down the way cannot even be imagined. Any journey worthy of the name involves getting just a little lost.

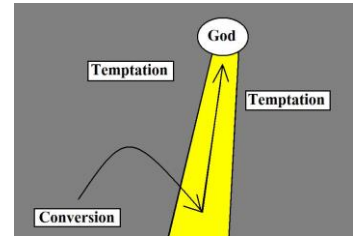
In the Sermon on the Mount, (show slide) Jesus is reported to have said, “Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.”² I quoted that passage from the King James Version, with its 16th century language, because it has led to a common misunderstanding about Christian commitment. From that passage, we get the phrase, “the strait and narrow,” not straight (like the path of an arrow), but strait (meaning a narrow entryway, like the Strait of Gibraltar). The

¹ See Acts 9:2, 16:17, 18:25-26, 19:9, 19:23, 22:4, 24:13, 24:22, See John 14:6.

² Matthew 7:13-14.

way you spell strait makes an enormous difference to the way we understand the Christian life!

(show slide) If you think that the Christian path is a straight one (like the path of an arrow), you might get the idea that the Christian life is a simple matter, straightforward, but with temptation on either side. All you have to do is learn it, and then any change in direction means deviation from the path, sort of like Dorothy following the yellow brick road to Oz. If she strays off of it, she gets into all kinds of trouble. If you think of Christian commitment this way, then commitment is a pretty simple affair, a temporary transition, a matter of getting onto the right path. Once that transition is complete, then you would likely think that Christians should live with confidence, certainty about progress and a refusal to deviate. It seems to imply that the only important transformation is the initial one, getting on to the right path in the first place, and afterwards, any significant change is likely to involve falling off the path. People who think of faith this way live with a lot of anxiety about change, a persistent nervousness about the unknown.



Is this the right way to understand the Christian life? Jesus certainly said the way was narrow, but he didn't say it was straight (like an arrow). But there are many who emphasize the beginning of their faith pilgrimage as if that were the only important point in it. They speak of being "saved," without much sense that God isn't done saving us yet, that we need to keep being transformed, over and over again. Unfortunately, this way of thinking of the life of faith can lead to rigidity, arrogance and self-righteousness, all things that Jesus warned against.

But what if we think of Christian conversion not as a simple, one-time affair, but as an ongoing process of opening ourselves again and again to being led by God.

Converting, in the present, continuous tense, rather than conversion, in the past,

might be a better way to think of the Christian life. There is another symbol that may offer a more helpful way of thinking about the spiritual life.

According to this symbol, the Christian life is more like walking a twisting, turning path. One ancient symbol of such a narrow winding way is the labyrinth. (slide). Labyrinths are ancient symbols that have been

found in tombs from the Stone Age, ancient coins from Europe (Slide) and

baskets from the ancient Indigenous peoples of Arizona (Slide). They seem to have functioned as symbols for challenging journeys, both physical and spiritual. During the middle ages, labyrinths were common symbols of the

Christian life, carved into baptismal fonts and inlaid in the floors of cathedrals



(slide). Today labyrinths, like this water fountain in Bristol, England, (slide) and the one outside our own building here in Sunnybrook, remain powerful symbols of life's journey.

A labyrinth is constantly twisting and turning in unexpected and unpredictable directions. If you have ever walked a labyrinth, or if you can imagine walking one from this picture, (slide) starting at the opening at the bottom to the destination in the centre, you will see that the path turns back and forth, sometimes moving halfway around and bringing you much closer to the destination, but sometimes abruptly moving further away. I have walked labyrinths on many occasions and it was often hard to know where I was in relation to the centre. Sometimes I thought I was quite close, only to discover the path suddenly taking me further away. Other times I thought I had a long way left to go, only to discover after a single turn that the path opened up into the central resting area. When others were also walking the labyrinth, it was even harder to know where others are. Consequently, it was very difficult to assess progress, whether my own or that of others, towards the goal. Being close to the centre does not necessarily mean one is close to the end of the journey. It is impossible to judge.



If the centre represents God, then the labyrinth metaphor requires that you will often need to turn and face away from the centre in order to eventually reach God. Perhaps that means that doubts and questions, which seem like acts of unfaith to the straight and narrow people, are part of the journey of faith. Perhaps that is why after Jesus' baptism, the Spirit led him into the wilderness to be tempted. Perhaps facing our temptations, doubts and questions is an important part of the spiritual journey and not something to be suppressed.

This metaphor of the narrow, winding way suggests that the Christian life is a state of continual openness to change, of "converting" as an ongoing process rather than "conversion" as a singular event. It suggests an attitude of humility about one's own progress and even greater humility about the progress of others. To others it may look like being aimless and wishy washy, but to those on the way it is the most arduous and difficult of journeys, and the most rewarding.

When I was twelve years old, my family spent a year in Birmingham, England, and I attended a local grammar school. I signed up for a school trip to Hampton Court Palace, the sprawling country home that Henry VIII and Anne Boelyn built outside of London. Being twelve, I wasn't much interested in the history, (slide) but I had heard a lot about the maze formed by three hundred year old hedges and I was really excited about getting lost in it. But when I arrived at school



that Saturday morning, there was no one else there. The bus had left an hour before. I had got the time wrong! It took me forty-four years to reschedule that trip, but I did it a few years ago.

I spent an hour or two getting lost in that maze. It was great fun! Unlike the labyrinths you have seen so far which have only one path, and only one way to the centre, this type of labyrinth has lots of dead ends and wrong turns. You can get lost in there, pretty easily. And that is true of real life as well. In life you can take wrong turns. Addiction to alcohol and drugs, pornography and consumerism, can lead individuals astray. Like Peppe's papa in the children's story this morning, you can find yourself getting your priorities all mixed up. Maybe getting lost in a maze is a fun way of preparing ourselves for those more challenging forms of getting lost.

Perhaps that is why mazes (or to use the technical term, multicursal labyrinths) are so popular. (slide) Here is one in the shape of a giant's foot from Gloucestershire in England. And of course, there is the corn maze on the Kraay family farm outside Lacombe. There is wisdom in their slogan, "the real fun is in the journey." The point of the journey is not the destination, but the journey itself. Perhaps that is why none of these labyrinths have much room at the centre. The goal is not to arrive, but to live.



One of the things I like to do when I am visiting a new place is to explore somewhat aimlessly, following my nose until I have no idea where I am, and I am lost. Then I have to figure out how to get unlost. In the process of getting lost and unlost, I learn a place better than if I followed a guide. Barbara Brown Taylor, the author of many fine book on the spiritual life, thinks it is a good thing to practice getting lost, because it is too easy to get stuck in ruts and end up sleepwalking through life. Getting lost wakes us up and helps us be fully alive. When you are on unfamiliar ground, you can't rely on the beaten track "making all your choices for you. Leaving the beaten track, you agree to make your own choices for a spell. You agree to become aware of each step you take, tuning all of your senses to exactly where you are and exactly what you are doing."³

Getting lost in low-risk ways also prepares you for the times when "one of life's big winds knocks you clean off your course,"⁴ when the job ends, your partner

³ Taylor, *An Altar in the World*, 70-1.

⁴ Taylor, p. 72.

dumps you, you end up flat on your back in a hospital bed. These are what Barbara Brown Taylor calls “the advanced level in the practice of getting lost.”⁵ And at this level, some of God’s best work is done. When, like the ancient Israelites, we find ourselves lost in the wilderness, “brawny angels” come and wrestle with us. Here we learn that as sweet as success can be, failure has its own blessings. The times when I have been at my most vulnerable, my most lost, have been the times when I have really felt supported, like the net that catches the trapeze artists when they miss a move. The vulnerable times are also the times when I have felt my Grinch-like heart expand several sizes, so that I am more able be that net for when others fall.

The spiritual journey, the pilgrimage of life, is our way of following Jesus on the journey of faith. It is not an easy journey, or a straightforward one. Sometimes we will be confused about what direction is the faithful one. Sometimes we will make mistakes. We will need to change, and change again, trusting that even what may turn out to be dead ends will still help us in the process of our transformation. If the turning spoken of in the old Shaker hymn can stand for our transformation, then it may indeed be that “to turn, turn will be our delight, ’til by turning, turning, we come round right.” But in the end, the self-emptying way of Jesus, will guide us in the right direction. When we take our eyes off him, we lose our way. When we keep our focus on his embodiment of the God of love, we are led in the right direction, and we will find our way home. The step you take today may be the first you take along his way, or it may be the millionth, but even the millionth can be as uncertain and challenging as the first. The gate may be narrow, and the road may be hard, but it is the way to life, life abundant, and life eternal.

⁵ Taylor, p. 80.