

GOD'S GUIDANCE

Exodus 20:1-17; I Corinthians 1:18-25

When we commit our lives to God, we trust that God will guide us. Especially when we're faced with big decisions, we ask, "What does God want me to do?" You've fallen in love. You ask, "Does God want me to marry that person?" You've been offered a new job that involves relocating to a new country. You wonder, "Is that how God wants me to pursue my vocation?" The church is in a time of transition. We want to know, "What is God leading this congregation to witness in this time and this place?" Sometimes it's clear where God is guiding us, but other times it's hard to know. It's especially hard to know where God is guiding us when people of faith perceive God guiding them in different ways.

15 years ago, as the world was still reeling after September 11 terrorist attacks, the United States was wrestling with whether or not to invade Iraq in retaliation. Prior to the war President Bush prayed daily, read the Bible, and trusted God to guide him to make the right decision. At the same time the Pope sent an envoy to try to talk the President out of going to war, and leaders of many Protestant denominations, including my own, pleaded with the President to keep working for a diplomatic solution. In the congregation I was serving at the time, some members thought the President made the right decision by going to war. Others were adamantly against it. And people on either side could cite chapter and verse to support their position.

So, what's the point in asking God's guidance if some are going to get one answer and some are going to get another? Wouldn't it make our witness to Christ a lot stronger if all Christians could agree? Now I've got a simple solution: If everyone just agreed with me, everything would be perfect! Since that's never going to happen, how do people of faith know what God wants us to do?

Many of the choices we face probably don't have a right or wrong answer as far as God is concerned. I don't think it really matters to God if I have a cheese sandwich for lunch today or a ham sandwich. But for weightier matters God created the world so right and wrong should be obvious. The first chapter of Romans says, "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made." God gave us perception and reason and intelligence to think and understand. We were made with the capacity to figure out what is right and do it.

But we are imperfect creatures, and our ability to think clearly and correctly suffers from that imperfection. In order to help us when our reason and intelligence fall short, God gave us the law, summarized in the Ten Commandments, to guide us in God's ways. So, there is no excuse for not

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knowing what God wants us to do in our relationships with God and with other people because we have the law to guide and direct us.

But we have this innate tendency to twist God's law to serve our own ends. Just look at the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me." From the time God gave that commandment, people have responded, "Yes, but..." Once the Israelites got into the land God promised them, they noticed that the Canaanites, who were already there, gods that promised them good harvests and fertile fields. God had promised those things to the Israelites, but the Canaanites worshiped other gods, like Astarte and Baal, and they seemed to be doing pretty well. So, the Israelites decided that the smart thing to do would be to hedge their bets. They still worshiped God, but just to be sure they weren't overlooking anything that might help them, they also worshiped the Canaanite gods. It seemed the logical thing to do, in spite of the first commandment.

Each of us could recall how we've used our wisdom and our reason to get around the commandments. The fourth commandment tells us to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. But you can get a lot done on Sunday. It's a good day to catch up on work at the office or around the house. Going to church and spending some extra time in prayer and Bible study or just enjoying this beautiful life God has given us and letting the world get along without our help for just one day – none of the sounds like a very efficient use of time. Or the ninth commandment, "You shall not bear false witness." Who among us hasn't been able to justify in our minds those times we've been less than truthful? Any time we've bent the truth, we've been able to find a reason. When your neighbor asks what you think of their awful new haircut, telling the unvarnished truth might not be worth the consequences. If the boss thinks that costly mistake that I made was the fault of my coworker, whom I don't like in the first place, why should I suffer the consequences? I may have done something wrong, but if I can get away with it this time I'll never do it again. I promise.

We know right from wrong. God has made it clear what God expects from us. But that power the Bible calls sin causes us to use the very gifts of reason and intellect God has given us to twist our way out of doing what God wants us to do.

That's why the message of the cross sounds so absolutely foolish to our rational minds. Our rational minds tell us that the way to overcome evil is by drawing on the same power evil uses to harm us. If people say bad things about me in school, then the way to deal with it is for me to say even worse things about them. After the last school shooting, one of the remedies that's being put

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forth for the epidemic of gun violence that's plaguing the United States is, "The only thing that will stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun."

We human beings can make a case for almost anything that will support our way of looking at the world, a perspective where we are at the center and what matters most is our own good. God's way is a different way, the way of love. God's way affirms that each of us is important, each person matters, and we find our deepest purpose when we claim our part in what God is doing for all creation, the work of love that Jesus does from the cross.

This is what is so foolish to the world: God, in order to conquer the power of sin and evil that separates us from God and from one another, comes to us in the person of Jesus. Jesus is completely God, one with the almighty power that created the universe. At the same time, he is completely human, sharing with us all our human frailties except for sin. After doing miracles to show that he is from God, and after teaching how God gave the law because God loves us and wants what is best for us, Jesus was arrested for breaking God's law by doing things like healing on the Sabbath and welcoming those who were not considered worthy by those who thought of themselves as good people. He was tried as a traitor and a blasphemer and executed as a criminal. Not only was he executed, he was killed in a way designed to cause the most shame and humiliation – he was nailed to a cross. He took our sins on him and completely emptied himself of all the glory he has with the Father in order to put to death that self-centeredness that separates us from God. His corpse lay in the tomb three days, cold and lifeless. On the third day God raised Jesus from the dead. In raising Jesus, God claimed our victory over sin and death. Jesus ascended into heaven and now he reigns over all creation in love and justice. Our lives and the future of the universe are in his hands, and he is working his purpose out until that time when he comes again in glory and establishes his perfect rule over all creation.

According to human wisdom, that makes absolutely no sense. The way you conquer evil is by meeting force with force. According to human wisdom, you stand up for yourself and don't give in to anyone. According to human wisdom, you trust your own strength and instincts because if you don't... well, if you don't, you'll get crucified.

But how else is God going to get around our ingenious ways to avoid God's guidance unless God does something that appears so outrageous by our standards that it's impossible to rationalize it or make excuses for it?

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The cross shows us how powerfully deceptive sin is. It shows us that contrary to all human reason, the most powerful force in the universe is the power of self-emptying love. The cross transforms us so that we understand and follow God's law in the spirit it was given, a spirit of love and humility.

In November the Presbyterian Church of East Africa approved the ordination of women as ministers of the gospel. The issue had been debated and prayed about for decades. On the one hand there are straightforward statements in the New Testament that instruct women to submit to men in the church and not to speak in the context of worship. On the other hand, there are examples of women taking important roles in the work of Jesus – women of means supported his ministry, and the first person to testify to his resurrection was a woman. The heart of the gospel is the inclusion of all people into the work of Christ. Paul said in Galatians 3:28 that in Christ “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” After many years of prayerful discernment, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa heard God guiding them to accept the gifts for ministry that the Holy Spirit has given to many of its women, some of whom have preached the most powerful sermons I've ever heard and accept them into positions of leadership that had been closed to them in the past.

The cross makes us ask ourselves hard questions about our certainties. The cross shows us how to read scripture and to pray from the perspective of the one who overcame hatred with love, evil with goodness, pride with humility. It lets us receive God's Commandments not as rules to keep us in line but as gifts that guide us in the ways of love and humbleness so we respect and honor those who hear God's guidance differently from us. The cross shows us that God's way is the way of giving and sacrifice. God gives us the law, and from the cross Jesus shows us how to live it. That's how God guides us, from the cross where we see how the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.