

**Seeking Christian Community:
Choices for Following the Path of Christ**

March 6, 2017*

Peggy Oldham, Ed.D.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear.

.....

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference. (Frost)

This excerpt from the writing of the late poet Robert Frost (1951) entitled *The Road Not Taken* is familiar to nearly every American student of English literature, and perhaps to many of you. Although its true message has been debated by scholars, it famously outlines an age-old dilemma. Making choices. We make choices each second of every day. They can be as simple as deciding what clothing to wear to class, or as challenging as deciding the vocation you will pursue. Some choices require diligent thought, wisdom, discipline, and prayer, while others are made on a whim. Whether small or large, perceived to be important or inconsequential, life is a matter of

* This paper was presented by Dr. P. Oldham on the occasion of her installation as Assistant Professor of Leadership at Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary.

choices. John Wooden, the famed American college basketball coach who was named six times as coach of the year, coined this inspirational phrase: “There is a choice you have to make in everything you do. So keep in mind that in the end, the choice you make, makes you” (Staneart 2015). C. S. Lewis (1952) wrote about the complexity of choices in his book *Mere Christianity* stating, “Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different than it was before.... You are slowly turning either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow creatures, and with itself” (92). Our choices can have serious eternal consequences, and the roads they take us down can make “all the difference” in the life we ultimately live.

As a person who has studied psychology in both my bachelor and master’s program, the choices people make and the effects of those choices are of significant interest to me. I have spent the last twenty-seven years in Christian higher education, and in doing so have become a “student of students,” questioning, observing, and researching what young adults do, why they do it, and to what effect. Much of that focus in the four Nazarene universities and seminary in which I have served has been in the area of student development within a “Christian community.” This focus includes the choices students have made to live, survive, and thrive together in their daily walk.

Henri Nouwen (1996) describes Christian community as “a quality of the heart. It grows from the spiritual knowledge that we are alive not for ourselves but for one another” (23). Community can be where two or more are gathered, but God’s communion within community starts with the flame of His fire burning within one individual and the choices that individual makes. In order to fully understand the driving force of choices in the life of a Christian and, in particular, within the context of a Christian community, we first look to Jesus, the “author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:2 NASB). Christ’s ministry, teaching, and instruction perfectly paralleled his choices. His life was marked with passion and purpose. His resolute walk modeled his core convictions. His message was congruent with

his actions, which stemmed from disciplined choices of the will, mind, emotions, spirit, and body. In his walk, meaningful decisions were never made from mere whim, for he knew the path to take and what the consequences of that path would ultimately be.

Possessing Purpose

There are five areas of Jesus's intentionality of purposeful interaction with his Father and his world that I believe provide examples of choices for us to emulate in our lives within the context of community.

This first is that Jesus left both his heavenly and earthly home in search of his ministry. In doing so, he chose to trade the familiar for the purposeful. He left comfort for the calling of being involved with the lost of the world to fulfill His Father's business.

This choice of leaving the familiar for the purposeful might seem at first glance to be an easy one to check off your list. Many of you have come many kilometers from home to study at an international seminary. You have chosen a path not traveled by many, coming great distances, both literally and figuratively, to study and prepare for God's calling in your life. But trading the familiar for the purposeful goes well beyond leaving the borders of your city or country. When you work and live with people who are different from yourself, you must make a choice to learn new ways of doing things, new ways of being, acknowledging different customs and cultures, and embracing those who function differently from your familiar way of life.

These experiences can create what Mezirow (1991) calls "disorienting dilemmas." You are now forced to view the world differently. You have been faced with the decision of whether to trade what you have known as "community" for something that may look, sound, and be totally different—with people who may or may not look, act, and think like you do. Jesus most certainly encountered this as he left the confines of his hometown of Nazareth. His community became stretched to include greater parts of the Judean world. Even within the context of Judaism he encountered both the humble and the proud, the righteous and the pious, the poor in search of a Savior, and the un-needy and unaccepting. What should have been a united "community" of God, willing to accept the message of a Messiah, was in-

stead greatly divided. Writing about the realities of division within communities, James Emery White (2011) believes that “community is not something encountered; it is something that is constructed. It’s built life by life, and the building is often very hard work—particularly because so much of the work involves people who are difficult to work with” (129). How you choose to respond to the varied communities in which you will find yourself, both here and when you leave APNTS, will be greatly influenced by how you choose to accept or refuse fellowship with those around you even now. Jesus could have been distracted by a less than accepting community, but he maintained his focus on his purpose. You have the choice every day to purposefully do the same.

Physically Dwelling

This leads us to a second choice of Jesus: choosing to physically dwell among humans. While it is true that Jesus as part of the triune God chose to “dwell” among us when he came to earth in human flesh, once he got here and saw how depraved we really were and humanly had the cognitive, mental, emotional, and spiritual ability to discern what was happening in this world, he didn’t *really* have to “dwell” among us. He could have isolated himself in a monk-like fashion, choosing to pray to his Father in heaven for release from the oppression of this world. But he didn’t. Instead, he chose to live with and among us.

Being with people—physically dwelling with them—is necessary for human physical and emotional health. Dozens of studies have supported research findings that “social isolation of otherwise healthy, well-functioning individuals eventually results in psychological and physical disintegration, and even death” (Umberson and Montez 2010). Additionally, “adults who are more socially connected are healthier and live longer than their more isolated peers” (Umberson and Montez 2010). This information alone should be enough to ensure that no APNTS student ever complain about having a roommate! Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1954), a German pastor, lecturer, and author who was executed in a Nazi prison camp in 1945, wrote about the complex need for human interaction nine years prior to his wrongful incarceration. He wrote that:

The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer. Man [*sic*] was created a body, and the Son of God appeared on earth in the body, he was raised in the body, in the sacrament the believer receives the Lord Christ in the body, and the resurrection of the dead will bring about the perfected fellowship of God's spiritual-physical creatures. The prisoner, the sick person, the Christian in exile see in the companionship of a fellow Christian a physical sign of the gracious presence of the triune God. (19–20)

So, the question now posed is, Are you living within the gracious presence of God by dwelling with his believers? Dr. Jeren Rowell, president of Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City, U.S.A., states that “the essence of pastoring after the pattern of Jesus is intimate engagement with people in the basic structures of life. It is walking with them, eating with them, listening, teaching, correcting, comforting, sending, and more” (32). When we live within the context of a seminary, within close proximity of our brothers and sisters in Christ, we can actually still choose whether or not to “dwell” among our fellow believers. We can choose to insulate and isolate ourselves even within a small space, limiting the time and energy we devote to being with others. This is sometimes a natural tendency for those of us who are introverts, as we need to retreat at times to regain our own emotional and spiritual energy by being alone. The words of Bonhoeffer (1954), however, encourage us to remain vigilant not just to dwell, but to rejoice in the act of dwelling; to see the presence of another Christian, even those who may be noisy when you are attempting to sleep, or irritating as they study late into the evening with the lights on, or demanding of your time as they question their life's calling—to see these moments as equaling the “gracious presence of the triune God” (20).

Participating by Being Present

Jesus's choosing to dwell was a physical act of being. But he also chose to be present. Being fully present is an emotional, affective decision of the will. Jesus was present when he sought people in need and, just as important, when he allowed those in need to seek Him. He chose to be present. He chose to jump into the fray of human existence, which is messy and raw.

He chose to get his hands dirty and have his human energy drained for the sake of others.

Are you practicing being present? In this age of social media, it has become tougher than ever to be emotionally and mentally present, truly experiencing life in the moment. According to research conducted by Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010), 46.9 percent of people spend much of their waking hours thinking about something other than what they are doing. Their research included 2,250 participants, aged 18–88, who responded to survey questions on an iPhone app; 26 percent, or 585 participants, were non-Americans. One conclusion of their study, as reported in *Science Magazine* and the *Harvard Gazette*, was that “a human mind is a wandering mind, and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind. The ability to think about what is not happening”—including what others are doing that you are not, what you might be missing, or where you would rather be—“is a cognitive achievement that comes at an emotional cost” (932). The authors noted, “Many philosophical and religious traditions teach that happiness is to be found by living in the moment,” living in the here and now. They found that people were “happiest when interacting with others, being present, including being engaged in person-to-person conversation” (932). In our time, being present for others may be quickly becoming that “road less traveled.”

Here is a well-known secret: being present is a choice! In case you have not noticed, here is another reality: being present is difficult. From the perspective of a counselor, I want you to know that choosing to be present with people you minister to can cost you a lot. There is sacrifice involved. You must be vulnerable to seeing the needs of others, seeing them in yourself, and letting others see your vulnerabilities. Quoting again from the writing of James Emory White (2011), there are many “emotional hits” in ministry, and they can include the stress of finances, church member and staff departures, criticism from those you minister to, and a “torrent of expectations” (21) for both you and your family. In his book entitled *What They Didn't Teach You in Seminary*, White outlines a number of ways to help avoid the emotional pitfalls of being present. These include some simple but profound suggestions, such as serving within the primary areas of your giftedness and pursuing “emotionally replenishing experiences” that will both

honor God and refill your emotional tank. There are boundaries to be set, whether you are pastoring a church, teaching in a Christian school, or running an NGO. Study to understand your gifts, your temperament, your personality strengths and weaknesses, and then be present and appropriately vulnerable in the best way God created you.

Practicing Abundant Generosity

Walter Brueggemann (2011), a world-renowned Old Testament scholar and prolific author, writes that “filled with God’s generosity, Jesus went around to people suffering from scarcity—of health, of acceptance, of power, of understanding—and replaced it with a gift of abundance” (2). And his giving abundantly was a choice. John 10:10 (NASB) records these words of Jesus: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” According to Brueggemann, this practice of abundance in Jesus did not start with his official ministry. It stemmed from a lifetime of practicing generosity within the context of his community. Brueggemann continues by describing that while living as a boy in Nazareth, Jesus probably heard his mother, Mary, often sing words of the Magnificat, such as, “He has filled the hungry with good things” (Luke 1:53). Brueggemann speculates that:

Jesus remembered the songs of Mary—songs of God’s generosity toward those in need. Jesus is well-schooled in the transformative generosity of God. He is also well-schooled in the conviction that if you share your bread with the neighbor, the world will be made new. He knows that generosity isn’t something you just think about, it was something you do. (2)

Jesus, in his ministry on earth, abundantly fed the five thousand, as is recorded in all four Gospels; he abundantly turned water into wine; through the abundance of the Spirit he healed the lame, the blind, a much-loved daughter; and he raised a brother from the dead. You may say, “But I can’t work such miracles! And I don’t have resources to abundantly give. How can I make a difference within my community?” I would invite you to consider that Jesus, through God’s Spirit, abundantly spoke words of encouragement and peace. He calmed fears. He broke bread. He cooked a breakfast

of fish for the hungry disciplines along the seashore. Because of his faith, Jesus assured a dying thief of his eternal home in heaven. Luke 6:45 (BLB) states, “The good [person] out of the good treasure of [the] heart brings forth that which is good.... For out of the abundance of [the] heart [the] mouth speaks.” And these words and actions of abundance come only at the expense of your heart and time. So, the question that is posed to you as you journey within Christian community is this: Is your abundance showing in what you choose to speak and do?

Working in a Team

Another choice for Jesus was to work in a team. One of the most dreaded assignments I can ever give a class is for them to work together in groups. Most students I have taught would prefer to do their own work, at their own pace, taking the consequences for their own academic decisions without having to worry about how the work of a team member could potentially threaten their chance for receiving an “A.” I remind my students that Ecclesiastes 4 states, “Two are better off than one, because together they can work more effectively. If one of them falls down, the other can help him up.... Two people can resist an attack that would defeat one person alone. A rope made of three cords is hard to break” (4:9–12 GNT). Jesus could have ministered alone and still gathered throngs of followers, but he did not. Instead, he formed a ministry team of disciples. He lived, laughed, ate with, and ministered to His world alongside this group of rough and largely uneducated men. He chose to empower and mentor mere men, trusting them with the keys to the kingdom of God. Who are you choosing to mentor? Who are you allowing to mentor you? Who are you devoting time to in order to more effectively bring the kingdom of God to earth?

Conclusion

Jesus was fully God *and* fully human. And these outlined choices for Jesus, in his humanness, were all deliberately modeled acts—choices of the will, mind, emotions, spirit, and body. Being purposeful often meant going against the grain of society. Dwelling with others often led to conflict and pain. Being present meant continually laying aside personal comfort and emotional strength. Practicing abundance meant giving fully and freely of the power of the Spirit living within Him. Mentoring others required the

patience and love that comes with choosing to guide, encourage, and support. None of these are necessarily the “first choice” of our human nature but are actions that kingdom seekers will choose through God’s strength to model Christ within the communities where we live, study, and work.

In his book, *A Love Worth Giving*, author Max Lucado (2002) poses rhetorical questions to his readers regarding the choices Jesus made. He asks:

If you knew that only a few would care that you came, would you still come? If you knew that those you loved would laugh in your face, would you still care? If you knew that the tongues you made would mock you, the mouths you made would spit at you, the hands you made would crucify you, would you still make them? Christ did.... He went from commanding angels to sleeping in the straw. From holding stars to clutching Mary’s finger. The palm that held the universe took the nail of a soldier. Why? Because that’s what love does. (58)

And we too, as Christ’s followers, must decide each day how we will respond through our choices, submitting our mind, body, spirit, and emotions to His calling, all in response to His love for us and His lost world. Community can be where two or more are gathered, but God’s communion within community starts with the flame of His holy fire of love burning within one. We must choose community. And so the question becomes, Will you be that one?

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood.

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I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference. (Frost)

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