

“IN LIFE AND IN DEATH”

a sermon on Acts 7:51-60, I Peter 2:11-17, John 14:1-6

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Psychiatrist Scott Peck’s well known book, *The Road Less Traveled*, begins with these words: “Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult — once we truly understand and accept it — then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.”

The *problem*, according to Dr. Peck, is that too many of us *assume* that life is *supposed* to be *easy*, and so our time and energy is spent lamenting about our lot, or as he puts it, “moaning . . . that [our] difficulties represent a unique kind of affliction that should not be and that has somehow been especially visited upon [us].”

“I know about this moaning,” he goes on, “because I have done my share.” We all have. It is the *easiest* response to adversity, and it comes very naturally to us.

Peck argues that the road to health and wholeness, however, lies along another path — a road less traveled — which is the *challenging* path of *acceptance*, and *self-examination*, and *intentionality*.

And that journey *begins* by accepting that life will be difficult. That is not far from the Christian confession — and Scott Peck was, after all, was a devout believer. Our *Christian* confession is that we are all *in great need*. Until we recognize our *need* for restoration, forgiveness, wholeness we will never find “room” for God in our lives, and we will certainly never understand the great notions of grace, and faith, and salvation.

But then the Christian life — the life of *discipleship* — is taking the “road less traveled.” It is, in other words, not always taking (or even *seeking*) the easy way out, but following the course of what is good and right.

Clearly, the journey begins *inwardly*. For Peck, it begins with the concept of “discipline.” I think even John Calvin himself would agree with that! Life is not

about *avoiding* difficulty. It is about *responding* appropriately to life's challenges and problems. It is about *facing* life's difficulties – and coming through them *stronger* and *healthier* than we were before. It is about *learning*, and *growing* in grace, all our days.

That isn't easy. Admittedly. But it is *possible*. It is *possible* for us to *use* every life experience as a stepping stone to grow in grace, even through the most painful parts of the journey.

John's Gospel records that late on the evening of his last supper with the twelve, Jesus had a long, deep conversation with his disciples about times to come. He knew he would be leaving them soon. He knew it wouldn't be *easy* for them.

But “do not let your hearts be troubled,” he said. “*Believe.*” “Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.”

He *said* that because he *knew* how challenging the life of discipleship was going to be for them.

Part of the problem is simply that living “in the here and now” with integrity and discipline is *bound* to put us in conflict with someone sooner or later. For Jesus' disciples, it was first the Jewish leaders. Eventually, Peter was at odds with the new Gentile converts. Paul had problems with the Roman authorities, among others. “They will deliver you up to Councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues,” Jesus once said.

Our readings from the Book of Acts in this Easter season have been laying out the experience of the disciples in those early days for which Jesus had been preparing them. You recall that it all started out so well – with Peter preaching powerful sermons, and converts by the score.

And trying their best to live as the community they thought Jesus meant them to be, they began to pool all their resources together and make daily distributions, so that everyone would have enough, and all would be well.

It was a beautiful thought, and vision. But it was, of course, completely naïve when it comes to human nature. First, there was the incident with Ananias and Sapphira that we discussed last week, resulting in those two disciples' deaths.

Yet as tragic as that was, those disciples died because of their selfishness. And so while it says that “great fear seized the whole church” in the aftermath of the incident the disciples continued on with their communal life model – including their “daily distributions.”

Until the next challenge arose. While in those days it was still just *Jews* who were being converted to Christianity, some of those Jews were of *Greek* ethnicity – themselves (or their *families*, at least) converts to Judaism at some point, rather than “ethnic” Semitic people, prior to becoming Christians.

Well, those “Hellenists,” as they were known, began to complain that *their* widows weren’t being treated fairly in those “daily distributions,” which led to the creation of what we might today call a new “level of bureaucracy,” a new group of respected leaders (*other* than the Apostles), to handle the task of “serving” in the community. They were called, in Greek, *diákonos*, from which we get the words “deacon” and “diaconate,” an office that some Presbyterian Churches have as part of their structure to this day – and in some other Christian Churches, the names for a congregation’s elected leaders and board.

So then, another crisis averted, they thought. Now could return to living the “good life,” the “life abundant” that Jesus talked about!

Back to Scott Peck for a moment. If we *assume* that our lives and relationships are supposed to be easy (even if occasionally they are disrupted by crises that we must overcome), we’re still in trouble, and we’re setting ourselves up for disappointment, at least, and perhaps disillusionment or worse.

But if we assume that life and our life together will *not* be easy, then we can simply *rejoice* when it *is*, but *not* assume that it will be for long, and so be better *prepared* for whatever might come.

Our reading this morning from the book of Acts comes at the end of a powerful sermon by a man named Stephen, who was one of those “deacons” elected in the previous chapter. Obviously, Stephen didn’t just think that Jesus had come into the world, and been killed and then raised, in order for his followers to live a life of “peaceful bliss” in the world. At least, not in the world in which he found himself. And so Stephen *preached*, and when challenged, Stephen was willing to put himself and his own safety *at risk* for the sake of the Good News.

It cost him his life, in the end. The first true Christian martyr – bringing to an end the first Christian community’s little “communal experiment,” because in the aftermath of Stephen’s stoning, the first great *persecution* of Christians arose,

and the community scattered into the various towns of Judea and Samaria. And they thereby greatly expanded the Church's "mission field" and its *progress* of taking the Good News "to the ends of the earth!"

I would contend that what really happened on that day was that the Christian Church "came of age" – which from Scott Peck's perspective, was a *good* thing, because it created the possibility for them to find a much deeper sense of peace and joy in the realization that life – even "the Christian life" – was not going to be *easy*, but was still *good*, and *meaningful*, and *worth living*.

Our ultimate Christian confession is not that in Christ life will be simple or easy. It is that (to quote one of our confessions), "In life and in death, we belong to God." It is our knowledge that we belong to God *in death* that enables us to encounter and face life's adversities with a sense of faith and trust, and it is our knowledge that we belong to God *in life* that enables us to face death with a sense of faith and trust that life doesn't just *end* when we die, but continues on in God's nearer presence.

Dear friends, we are people of faith. In life and in death we belong to God. Therefore, let us continue on the journey of life without troubled hearts, in the knowledge that God is in charge, no matter what. God's presence is inescapable, even when it seems distant, and God's *Will* is being accomplished, even if we can't see it.

In life and in death, we belong to God. Do not let your hearts be troubled.
About anything!

And to God be the Glory.