

We are daily faced with choices and decisions. Some are easy. Some are merely done out of habit or out of routine: what we eat, where we shop, etc. Occasionally we may make a change but normally we have our routines, our likes and our dislikes and we make the same decisions daily. I thought of Wings and “snack time” and how we wondered what snacks the students would like and how could we get them to try something new. There was one student where there was nothing catsup couldn’t cure!

Then, though, there are those times when our choices become harder. When we long for and seek direction. We pray. Where? Why? What? How? Who? We need help in making these decisions. We look to God or others for direction and guidance. We want an answer. One does come from Scripture. One we may not like but: ***God always pushes us forward, never back.***

God is always pushing us forward or moving us ahead. Elijah is coming to the end of his ministry; Elisha is coming to a new beginning in his. Elijah asks what he might do for his student during these last days they are together. Elisha’s response is crucial to the direction his ministry will take. What does Elisha want? He asks for a double portion of Elijah’s spirit (faith, wisdom, strength, vision, and insight). This is not something that is in Elijah’s hands to give. It is up to God. Thus, the response, “*If you see me go...*”

As they are walking Elijah is taken up into heaven. Elisha’s request has been granted but this means that Elisha must move Elijah’s ministry forward. Elisha is not to build shrines to Elijah and try to keep Elijah’s memory alive in the land. He must keep the Word of God alive in the hearts and minds of the people by moving them forward from where Elijah left off. He has received a double portion of Elijah’s spirit – meaning the ministry must go forward.

Jesus and the disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. Normally Samaria is avoided. This is his final trip to Jerusalem. Not all of his trips are successful, not everyone welcomes him. The town refuses to offer any hospitality to Jesus and the disciples. Now, this is not just to Jesus and his disciples, but to any Jew who might be going through their village. There is a long history of hatred and distrust between Jews and Samaritans – the feud is longstanding. James and John are upset with the response of the villagers. They want to teach them a lesson. They want to duplicate Elijah – 2 Kings 1 tells of Elijah bringing down fire from heaven on the representatives of King Ahaziah. This will show them not to accept Jesus. However, Jesus forbids them. He challenges the thinking of James and John. This was yesterday’s solution to such problems; there is another way, the way of forgiveness, reconciliation and peace. Retaliation is a thing of the past. ***The way of God moves forward.***

Luke continues with three brief stories of peoples’ encounter with Jesus. The first is a challenge to the theology of the past. The man is looking for security. “*I will follow you wherever you go*” (Luke 9:27). He has seen the miracles. Perhaps he was present with the feeding of the 5,000. To go with Jesus is to go with a sense of security. But Jesus says there are no guarantees in following him. No roots are settled down when one is with Jesus. He has no place to call home, no place to lay his head. This is not a good image for a recruitment poster. To enter Jesus’ kingdom brings no earthly guarantees of security or riches. Jesus goes against the popular theology of his day where riches and security were an indication of God’s blessing (even present in some theologies today). God is blessing Jesus and his ministry but... ***Jesus is pushing their thinking forward in a new direction.***

Next comes the invitation to one of his followers to make the commitment to truly follow Jesus. He agrees but he wants to go home to bury his father. Audience knows that

this man's father is not dead. If his father had died he would be home taking care of the details of his father's burial, not following Jesus. What the man is saying is, "Let me wait until my father dies, whenever that is, and then I'll come and follow you." The man is bound by the tradition of his day. A son is bound to his father until his father dies. Earthly commitment takes priority over heavenly one. Jesus pushes the man, and others, to break with the traditions. Allegiance to God's kingdom takes priority over any earthly alliance. ***He is pushing forward their thinking about what it means to be a follower of God.***

Then another comes and wants to follow Jesus, but he wants to go home and say "good-bye" to his family. Or, he wants to go home and seek his family's permission to follow Jesus. Again, everyone in the crowd knows that the family will not give this man permission to follow a young rabbi. He is needed at home, and this gives him the out – "Dad won't let me." He wants someone else to make the final decision for him. Jesus is again pointing out that the decision has to be the decision of the man. ***Jesus is again pushing us forward and not back.***

The challenge to the church today is whether it is pushing forward or going back. What is the direction of our vision? There are new types of ministry springing up all over the world. And, there are critics of these ministries. However, these critics are not from the world – the world does not seem to care – but from within the church. Any quick web search will bring up blog after blog that criticizes new types of ministry or new expressions of faith. If you read some of them they are almost following in the steps of Elijah and calling for God to rain down fire and destroy these new programs and endeavors. We can't accept the new expression of faith (it might not be for us, but it may meet the need of others). The church is tearing down the church. We need not worry about the church being destroyed from the outside; we are doing a very good job tearing it down from the inside.

We forget that ***God is always pushing us forward.*** If you read the Scriptures with the idea of seeing how God is moving you will soon discover that God has always moved people forward. As they journeyed from Egypt to the Promised Land the people grew weary. The slavery under the Egyptians looked good compared to what they were facing in the desert. God could have just left them there or sent them back to Egypt and slavery. Instead, though, ***God keeps pushing them forward*** to something better, to a promise, a hope.

The image of God has now moved to one of hope, reconciliation, forgiveness and restoration. Yet, we often fall into the past and want to call down the fire from heaven, and destruction. We long for the past. We long for the way things used to be – forgetting that ***God always pushes us forward.***

If the past was so great – if we have been doing such a good job – why are we in the shape we are in?

God's spirit is a creative, moving spirit.

God seeks to move us and the church forward. God seeks to have us grow in faith. We are springs of living water. And, springs of living water always gush forward finding new paths and directions. The majesty of the Grand Canyon was accomplished by water moving forward. What happens when water does not move forward? We get the Dead Sea where nothing lives. We are the living water – water moving forward. Aren't we?

NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985
NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1989

Looking Back or Going Forward?
II Kings 2:9-14
Luke 9:51-62

Pastor Dennis Plourde

Sunday, June 27, 2010

Page 2 of 2