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Taking the Long Way Around
Luke 13:31-35

Almost 600 years before the life of Jesus, a Greek slave (according to legend) was credited with telling many stories which usually included animals and had a wise and moral nature. They are known as “Aesop’s Fables. Here’s one of them:

A Man and his son were once going with their Donkey to market. As they were walking along by its side a countryman passed them and said: “You fools, what is a Donkey for but to ride upon?”

So the Man put the Boy on the Donkey and they went on their way. But soon they passed a group of men, one of whom said: “See that lazy youngster, he lets his father walk while he rides.”

So the Man ordered his Boy to get off, and got on himself. But they hadn’t gone far when they passed two women, one of whom said to the other: “Shame on that lazy lout to let his poor little son trudge along.”

Well, the Man didn’t know what to do, but at last he took his Boy up before him on the Donkey. By this time they had come to the town, and the passers-by began to jeer and point at them. The Man stopped and asked what they were scoffing at. The men said: “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself for overloading that poor donkey of yours and your hulking son?”

The Man and Boy got off and tried to think what to do. They thought and they thought, till at last they cut down a pole, tied the donkey’s feet to it, and raised the pole and the donkey to their shoulders. They went along amid the laughter of all who met them till they came to Market Bridge, when the Donkey, getting one of his feet loose, kicked out and caused the Boy to drop his end of the pole. In the struggle the Donkey fell over the bridge, and his fore-feet being tied together he was drowned.¹

The moral of his story is, “If you listen to what everybody tells you to do, you’ll lose your donkey.”

I doubt that Jesus was ever exposed to the Greek stories of Aesop, but based on his wisdom and response in today’s Lukan text, he understood the principle involved.

¹ *Folk-Lore and Fable: Aeson, Grimm, Andersen, “The Harvard Classics”* (New York, P. F. Collier & Son Corporation: 1937), 35-36.

The 13th chapter of Luke begins with Jesus, while on his journey to Jerusalem, teaching the followers about what it means to be a part of the Kingdom of God—what the Way to God is like, and the need to change minds and hearts. He told simple stories filled with wisdom. He demonstrated his integrity, coincidentally, when he healed a woman who had arthritis so bad she couldn't look up. It happened to be the Sabbath, so one of those Sabbath encounters ensued.

More stories were told on the road to Jerusalem. Someone asked: "Will only a few be saved in the eventual conflict with Roman authorities?" Jesus responded, "Whether few or many is not your worry. Put your mind on your life with God. The way to life—to God!—is vigorous and requires your total attention."

Then, some Pharisees appeared as his friends to tell Jesus that Herod was looking for him. He had better run for his life.

Jesus responded to them: "Tell that fox (Herod Antipas, who killed John the Baptist) that I have no time for him right now. I have more important things to do and I am not afraid of him." He then begins quoting scripture from Isaiah and Zechariah about Jerusalem killing her prophets, and then quoting from several psalms about how God has longed to gather them as a hen gathers her brood safe under her wings. (Psalms 57:1, 61:4, 91:4)

The issue we are confronted with is whether we take the easy path or whether we take the right path. That was the issue confronting Jesus through the Pharisees in today's passage. It was the same issue he was confronted with by his disciples on the Road to Caesarea Philippi, and the same repeated issue encountered by threats from religious leaders. Do you do what's easiest and go with the crowd? Or, do you think for yourself and summon up the courage to do what is right?

The starting point is not summoning up the courage to act. It is with what we know to be the Lenten theme of *metanoia*—changing your mind and heart, as it needs to be changed—"repentance," to use the one-word translation. This is the ongoing message of all these stories and parables in the 13th chapter of Luke. "You've got to change your ways of thinking and living," Jesus repeatedly said.

The repeated inspiration of the Vancouver Winter Olympics are stories of athletes overcoming the odds against them. Athletes like Lindsey Vonn, Shaun White, Bode Miller... To use the Dixie Chick's phrase, they're in the category of people "taking the long way around."

Following Wednesday evening's adult study, Chris Cann told me that her son, Lieutenant Robbie Casper (who is a graduate of Annapolis and on our Prayer List) is to be deployed, taking his third tour of duty. Puzzling to the average person might be his declining an excellent appointment by a Vice Admiral, which would have kept him in the states. Instead, he has chosen to go back on foreign soil for his specialized work. Robbie will deploy again any day now. He is "taking the long way around," based on deep conviction and high integrity.

This week, I have asked myself repeatedly, "Who have been some of the people who have inspired and challenged me to 'take the long way around' when necessary?"

I remember precisely the challenge that came in my first Call to ministry. At twenty-five years old, I had much to learn about people, the church, and being a pastor. I knew it and they knew it. What I wasn't ready for, emotionally and spiritually, were the politics and scheming I encountered. At the end of my third year, several messengers came to me to encourage me to buckle under, follow the way of a chosen few, or I might find my life and ministry more difficult. Barnwell County was a very political county as was the church to which I had been called. About the same time, I became aware of the church's pattern of short pastorates—one to three years for many except for my most recent predecessor, who stayed for five years. The church had many good people, but a handful had always tried to control it...and not for the church's betterment. Their past had its share of horror stories. A pattern developed of two former mayors in the church taking their pastors for a ride and explaining the facts of life. Some of their former pastors resigned and used the last sermon as a wild shot before exiting, which is never productive. The two former mayors were "politicking" to be re-elected to the church Board. One of their sons was the current mayor and current chair of the church's board. I had learned of the city limit sign being moved quietly in

the night, which enabled a friend and family member's farmland to become commercial real estate, inflating its price. Grant money awarded by the state for waterline improvement of two poor neighborhoods was unethically diverted to install twelve-inch water mains on the road where the city limits had been quietly extended.

Three options seemed to be before me: (1) suck it up and sell out my soul and integrity, (2) pursue another "Call" and avoid conflict, or (3) follow a path that seemed best for the church though it might mean losing my job. Only the last decision would preserve my integrity and allow me to live with myself. Trusting God and my instincts and with a knot in my stomach, I chose the latter. Church elections and the City Council and Mayor elections didn't go the way of heavy politicking.

During the four years that followed, the church became the leading growing church in the denomination's two-county presbytery-like judicatory. They developed a sports complex open to the community of two tennis courts, a children's playground, and a large covered picnic area. And, they ordained the first female in the state in that denomination. The church grew in numbers and spirit. They were supportive of several civic leadership opportunities I had, such as South Carolina's lower-state Health Systems Agency Board of Directors, as well completing my dissertation.

For me, the issue in that turning point taught me the high value of being true to myself—integrity—not abandoning my Call, and trusting God with my future.

At different times in our lives, all of us face the issue Jesus faced—abandoning our integrity, taking the easy road, and not living up to God's expectations for our lives. The starting point is never with arrogance and resolve. It must always be with contemplation and humility. The world is full of people who live with a mentality of "Ready, Fire, Aim." The Way of Jesus, particularly during the season of Lent, should be the way of spiritual openness.

Paul encouraged his friends at Philippi:

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love...stand firm in the Lord in this way. (Philippians 4:1)

Aesop's fable of "The Man, the Boy, and the Donkey" is filled with wisdom, as is this snapshot in the life of Jesus. Any time our desire to please someone else becomes more important than being true to ourselves, we are flirting with disaster.

"Will only a few be saved?" someone in the crowd asked Jesus. "That's the wrong question," Jesus responded. "You do what is right and honorable in the sight of God, and leave the outcome with God."

Remember the moral of Aesop's fable: "If you listen to what everybody tells you to do, you may lose your donkey." AMEN.

Philippians 3:17-4:1

17Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. 18For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. 19Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. 20But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. 21He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

1Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Luke 13:31-35

31At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." 32He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. 33Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' 34Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! 35See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"