

Crossroads

“This is what the Lord says, ‘Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.’”
(Jeremiah 6:16)

The keyword for this sermon is “crossroads.” What crossroads are you at? Marital? Relational? Parenting problems? Health? Finances? Death?

Kathleen Norris is an insightful Christian writer. In her 1998 book Amazing Grace she tells about a friend who had come to many crossroads and made many bad decisions. He had been raised in North Dakota and went as a young man he had gone west to work in the oil fields during the boom years of the 70’s and 80’s. “He was,” she writes, “fearless, one of those death-defying people who actually liked the roughest, meanest, most dangerous jobs on a rig. He’d made a bunch of money, and had drunk through much of it. Most days, to get through the shift on the oilrig, he would take a little speed. The cheap stuff, known as crank” (p. 18).

Eventually he got involved in drug networking. “He said that he had thought things were working out fine. He and the guy he was in business with were making good contacts, setting up a network, and he felt lucky to have fallen in with someone with so much experience. Then, one day, as they were driving on the outskirts of the small city that was to be the base of their operations, his friend veered, suddenly, onto the shoulder of the road. He had seen an acquaintance driving past in the other direction and was debating whether to turn his car around and follow him. ‘I need to kill him,’ he said matter-of-factly, reaching for a gun that our friend had not known was stashed under the front seat. ‘I need to kill him, but he’s with someone, and I don’t know ho. So it’ll have to wait.’

“‘It was right then I decided to get out,’ he said, ‘this was over my head.’” He had made many bad decisions before. How would he handle this crossroad?

You...and I don’t mean that in the plural, all of you, but in the singular, fill in your name... You have something going for you that this young man didn’t or at least he didn’t use. You have your confirmation vows. On some day, perhaps just a few years ago or many years ago...this is the 41st anniversary of my own confirmation...most of you were confirmed. Now two things happened on that day. First, you said that you were going to live the rest of your life by the truths that have been handed down to us in our faith. You agreed to do what our text describes. *“This is what the Lord says, ‘Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.’”* Those ancient paths include the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, Baptism, Confession, and Holy Communion.

The second thing that you did on the day of your confirmation...and this is really amazing...you vowed to take a vow to God to walk in the ancient paths. Whatever you were going to learn in college... Whatever you were going to learn in the school of hard knocks... Whatever disappointments would be forced upon you in relationships... Whatever disappointments would come to you from institutions, including the institutional church...Come what may, you vowed to live your life according to the Ten Commandments, the Creed, and so on. God's hard drive never crashes. His memory never fails. While you might have forgotten about the ancient paths, He has not. In His eye He still sees you pledging to walk in His ways.

These ancient paths lead to blessings for time and for eternity. Let me demonstrate that with two commandments, two of the ancient paths, first the commandment that talks about sex. "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Now you can always find Jesus at a crossroads. After all, He didn't have a corporate jet to whisk Him around first-century Palestine. The church didn't provide Him with a car. So He walked. That meant crossroads and Jesus met people at the crossroads. On time He met a woman we call "the Samaritan woman." Do you remember the story? It's in John chapter four. Jesus got into a conversation with her and she mentioned that she didn't have a husband. Right, Jesus said, you've had five husbands and the man you're living with now is not your husband. This Samaritan woman would fit in very well with contemporary American morality. The traditional family of a husband, a wife, and children, the Cleavers, the Nelsons, seems quite old-fashioned. All sorts of reasons are given for living together.

But consider this from William Bennett, former Secretary of Education. "In the case of couples who cohabit before marriage...virtually all research has concluded that contrary to the by-now-longstanding popular wisdom, the chances of a subsequent divorce are significantly *greater* – indeed, almost double – than in the case of couples who marry without prior cohabitation. And when children are involved, the odds of a couple breaking up are higher still." (The Broken Hearth, p. 77) The statistics agree with God! The ancient paths are the way to blessing.

Or consider the commandment that says, "Thou shalt not steal." Two pieces in the "New York Times" caught my eye the other week. When a teacher discovered cheating on a biology project at a Kansas City high school, she gave failing grades to the 28 cheaters. The parents complained and the superintendent ordered the grades changed. The teacher quit and the school principal resigned in protest. "Thou shalt not steal."

An op ed piece in the same edition of the Times was written by Lynne McTaggart, whose had written a book on Kathleen Kennedy of the Kennedy clan. Ms. McTaggart was asked to review a book by the popular historian Doris Kearns Goodwin. You've probably seen her on TV. Well, as Ms. McTaggart was reading the book she discovered many passages had been lifted from her own book but were passed off by Ms. Goodwin as her own work. "I wrote a kind review (of Goodwin's book)," wrote Ms.

McTaggart, “then hired a copyright lawyer. We eventually reached a satisfactory settlement.” (March 16, 2002; A27).

The moral seems clear: Parents, don’t insist on the ancient path, the way that says, “Thou shalt not steal,” and you’re preparing them to be on the short end of lawsuits...and life.

I could go through all the commandments, the entire creed, all the catechism and show how the ancient ways are of great practical help when you’re standing at a crossroad. Many a time they will tell you which way to go. However, the catechism does not answer every question. An interesting thing happened during Jesus’ dialogue with the Samaritan woman. She said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When He comes, He will explain everything to us” (John 4:25). Although Jesus had told her much, He did not explain everything. You and I have times in our lives when we stand at a crossroad, ask for direction, and heaven seems silent.

My sister, for example, has had 52 operations. How many times haven’t I asked to understand it? Why, God? She’s been a good church person her whole life. Sings in the choir. An exemplary person. Why? But heaven seems silent. These questions are not asked from a lack of faith. Quite the opposite. “Seek the Lord while He may be found” (Isaiah 55:6). Faith seeks answers, from God, from His word. While the word, the commandments, the creed, and so on often furnish direction, we all stand at crossroads when heaven seems silent.

When the Samaritan woman said that the Messiah would explain everything, Jesus didn’t tell her everything. Instead He said, “I who speak to you am He” (John 4:26). When you don’t know which way to turn, listen to Jesus as He keeps speaking to you Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. Keep searching His word during the week. “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Hear ye Him.”

One message He’ll keep repeating to you over and over again. “My son,” “My daughter, be of good cheer your sin is forgiven.” All the bad decisions you’ve made in your life... You’ve made them and so have I... the Spirit of Christ says to you a word of forgiveness and starts you anew on the paths that lead to blessing. You’ll hear the Spirit of Jesus say it many times because you’ll need it many times.

And when it happens, as it so often does, that you face a decision and aren’t sure which way to go... When the Ten Commandments, the Creed and so on don’t seem to give you clear guidance, then just remember to keep listening to Jesus. When He chooses not to give you clear guidance, He’s still with you. “I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Matthew 28:19).

So you won’t have to be afraid. “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Even in death, you can have hope. “Let not your heart be

troubled. You believe in God; believe also in Me. In my Father's house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:1-2).

At every perplexing crossroad, there's always Matthew 11:28. Do you know what 11:28 says? It is one of the ancient ways. You learned it long ago in confirmation class. While you're searching your memory, listen one last time to the text. *"This is what the Lord says, 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.'"*

Now Matthew 11:28: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

To conclude, let's return to our drug-dealing friend. "It was right then I decided to get out," he said, "This was over my head." Then Kathleen Norris writes this: "And that is salvation, or at least the beginning of it." (p. 19f)

Wait a minute, I thought. He doesn't know Jesus, the only name under heaven by which we are saved. He probably doesn't understand the nature of sin. He's just trying to save his own neck. What do you mean, "And that is salvation, or at least the beginning of it?"

She goes on: "I was glad to learn from The Oxford Companion to the Bible that 'the primary meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words translated 'salvation' is non-religious.'" I checked it out and what she writes seems to be true.

"It seems right to me that in so many instances in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the gospels salvation is described in physical terms, in terms of the here and now (in the crossroads of life), because I believe that this is how most of us first experience it. Only later do the more spiritual implications of salvation begin to make themselves known."

"Only later do the more spiritual implications of salvation begin to make themselves known." Those spiritual implications were made known to you in your confirmation. They are the ancient paths that promise blessings for time and for eternity. Yogi Berra: "When you come to the fork in the road, take it." When you come to a crossroad, remember your confirmation vow and then go forward confidently with Jesus. Yogi also said, "It ain't over 'til it's over." This sermon is over. Amen.