

Trajectories

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Ancient Witness: Matthew 4:17-22

Jesus believed in change. In fact, in our reading today the first thing he said when he started preaching—the first word out of his mouth—was “Change!” This word was later translated into the Greek word, *metanoia*, which means “change your mind” or “turn around your mind.” In the 4th century, Jerome translated this word into Latin as *paenitentia*, which is where we get the English translation, “repent” or “do penance.” Unfortunately, this gave Jesus’ words a moralistic connotation.

But Jesus wasn’t advocating a puritanical rule-following faith that was about superficial external requirements that can be enforced. No, he was saying that we find abundant life when we change our heart and mind, when we change the way we think and see the world. It’s this kind of deep, real, inner change, which we do over and over again, that can save us and bring wholeness. “If you don’t change direction,” wrote the Chinese sage, Lao Tsu, “you’ll end up where you’re heading.”

And both Jesus and Paul were hated by their own groups because they were constantly talking about change.

Now, many people don’t see Paul this way at all, saying, “But Steve, wasn’t Paul a sexist?” Even such a scholar as Herbert J. Muller, wrote:

Although they [women] had fared well with Jesus, appearing as central figures in many of the gentlest parables and episodes of the Gospels, their degradation began with St. Paul. He took literally the myth of Eve. While he remarked in passing that male and female were one in Christ Jesus, he taught more emphatically that on earth a woman should be subject to husband “in everything” as one who has been created for the sake of man. (What Paul Really Said About Women, Bristow)

Now, I have no desire to gloss over some of the problematic saying of Paul about women and explain them away. But I would like to point out that even though Paul reflected much of the thinking of his day on a lot of issues, he was also outside his culture. His ideas and his faith were moving in a particular direction. There was a trajectory to his faith.

Paul’s first convert in Europe was a woman, Lydia.

Paul referred to two women leaders in Philippi, Euodia and Syntyche.

Paul praised women such as Priscilla and Aquila as “co-workers in Christ.”

Paul mentions other women leaders such as Phoebe, who was a deacon.

It is often overlooked that the infamous passage in Ephesians concludes, “be subject to *one another*.” (Ephesians 5:21)

There is the beginning of something in Paul’s thinking with statements like, “There is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ.”

All this in spite of a culture of severe inequality!

Would Paul recognize the church of our society today? Hardly! Today's hard-won equality would be foreign to him. But the seeds of all this were in his words and ideas. His faith was moving in this direction.

And so it's a mistake, it seems to me, to take any individual and freeze their ideas and thoughts in a state of suspended animation, to treat them as static rather than as dynamic entities.

We tend to evaluate people in history as static beings, by who they were when frozen in a snapshot in time and not who they were becoming.

In his book on Thomas Jefferson, historian Ken Burns said that there have been two ways to deal with a complicated legacy such as Jefferson's. First is "to whitewash the past, to make almost saintly our country's central historical figures... a kind of hero worship that renders one-dimensional and free of controversy those in our shared past." The other way is to throw out Jefferson from our pantheon of heroes. "They are the revisionists who say that because Jefferson never freed his slaves, because he wrote about the inferiority of the black race, and because he promoted bloody revolution and inspired today's fringe militias, we are obligated to get rid of him."

Some well-intentioned people have rushed to Jefferson's defense by saying he was just a man of his times, as a Virginia planter he couldn't free his slaves. But this doesn't tell the whole story. His neighbor, Edward Coles, freed his slaves and urged Jefferson to do the same. His mentor, George Washington, eventually freed his slaves as did Jefferson's cousin, John Randolph.

Of course, we need to understand Jefferson and others in the context of their lives. Nor should we gloss over their imperfections and shortcomings. But we also need to see where they were going, the trajectory, the incredible thrust of their lives.

It was Jefferson who wrote the Declaration of Independence. He spoke for political, religious, intellectual and personal freedom. Going against the grain of the entire history of the world, he insisted on a separation between political dealings and the dogma of particular religious views. And in a single brilliant sentence he articulated our "inalienable rights" and freedom for "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Listen to Burns:

And we have taken the narrow phrase of Jefferson's that all men were created equal—that is to say, all white men of property—and exploded it to include blacks and other minorities, women, handicapped people, gays, etc. Our genius as a people has been in continually enlarging the ideas we have inherited from those giants who went before us.

I would say that by following their trajectories, *we are keeping their spirits alive*. That is to say, to see this trajectory is to see the Spirit of God. Alive. Moving. Transforming.

And so as we think about people of different generations and their faith—and think about them we must—the better question is: "Which direction have they been heading in? What was their trajectory?"

The Preamble to the Constitution begins, "We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union... establish this constitution." The framers expected that subsequent generations would continue along their trajectory, striving again and again to form a more perfect union. But a trajectory is

never a straight path. There are detours. Missteps. Wrong turns. On a national level, as we have strived to move toward our highest ideals, whenever there was progress toward a more equal, democratic and just society—abolishing slavery, women’s rights, labor rights, civil rights—there has always been a backlash to this positive change, a reactionary response, taking us off course, going backward. We see that today—an effort to take us away from a democratic society toward an autocratic one, away from a government based upon the rule of law toward corruption and the consolidation of naked power.

When he was talking to his followers and the Jewish religious leaders, Jesus said,

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. (Matthew 5:17)

In other words, the ideas about God of Jesus and his followers, the Christian principles and hopes, were all rooted in the Hebrew scriptures and grew out of them. The Christian faith is part of the trajectory of the Jewish faith.

Jesus rejoiced in his Jewish heritage and in his people’s prophets. Yet, he also believed in a *living God*. He did not think God was done working, ending in the words and works of Malachi, the last book of the Hebrew bible. Jesus believed in the *progressiveness of revelation*. God continues to lead from partial to fuller truth.

Perhaps many of the religious leaders did not understand this, and they saw Jesus and his followers as enemies to be cast out instead of a further development of their own movement. And there was a violent backlash against him.

The word of God is not a snapshot, frozen in time. Rather it is like a movie, progressively unfolding, frame after frame. The word of God, it is written, is *living and active*. (Hebrews 4:1)

In a sermon 100 years ago, the great American liberal preacher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, wrote:

[In the Bible] one can find God thought of as an oriental monarch; there, too, are patriarchal polygamy, and slave systems, and the use of force on unbelievers. Only in the Bible these elements are not final; they are always being superseded; revelation is progressive. The thought of God moves out from oriental kingship to compassionate fatherhood; treatment of unbelievers moves out from use of force to appeals of love; polygamy gives way to monogamy; slavery, never explicitly condemned before the New Testament closes, is nevertheless being undermined by ideas that in the end, like dynamite, will blast its foundation to pieces.

In the gospel of John, Jesus says, “When the spirit of truth comes, it shall guide you into all truth.” (16:1) In other words, finality in the Bible is not behind us; it is always *ahead*. We have not reached it. We cannot encompass all of it. God is *leading* us out toward it.

As Paul wrote, we see only partially, “through a mirror, dimly.” We shall only later know fully and see God “face to face.” But now, we are in continual transformation, from glory to glory.

In our tradition, we say that the church is “always reforming.” As the church, we are on a trajectory. Revelation is progressive. There’s always a backlash to true progress in the church, taking Christianity

off course to protect power and control and resist change. Here are some words by the pilgrim leader, John Robinson, written in 1620 put to verse:

*We limit not the truth of God,
To our poor reach of mind,
By notions of our day and sect,
Crude, partial and confined.
No, let a new and better hope
Within our hearts be stirred:
The Lord hath yet more light and truth
To break forth from his word.*

We are getting at not just the nature of revelation, but also at the nature of our personal faith. In the Bible, faith is about relationship, not a set of unchanging rules. It is a relationship that constantly changes us, sets us in a particular direction, a journey, a trajectory.

The important question is not who we are, but *who are we becoming?* What is our trajectory? Our direction? Are we standing still, or are we moving?

God works in history to transform society, to change the views and practices of the church—and God works to constantly change each of us, as well, setting us off each on our own trajectories.

I am reminded of a passage from a book by Austin Farrer, *Said or Sung*, that is about the constant change and movement along a path the God provides for the church and individuals:

The skill of the divine power is an infinite patience of improvisation. No sooner has one work gone awry than his fingers are pressing it into the form of another. There is never a moment for the clay, when the potter is not doing something with it. God is never standing back and watching us, his fingers are on us all the time.

Let us not stop, let us not rest, let us turn and change, turn and change, until we find our way home. May God's spirit guide our trajectory, as a nation, as a religious tradition and as individuals.