

Matthew 4:12-23

Have you ever been driving on an interstate and all at once realized that either you missed your exit or you somehow got going in the wrong direction? I remember once driving in mid-Pennsylvania realizing I wasn't where I was supposed to be, but not knowing how to get where I needed to be. This was in the early days of the GPS, and it didn't work in that region. Of course I didn't have a map with me, so I took the phone a friend option... actually I phoned my father. He was great with maps and directions. He explained to me exactly where I needed to exit and get back on the interstate and then where I needed to turn to point me in the right direction. After that he said to call the place where I was staying to find out how to get to them. I did exactly what he told me to do, and when I phoned the retreat center they said a lot of people needed help in finding their location.

John the Baptist pointed people in the right direction, away from sin, telling them to repent and turn away. In Matthew's gospel it was after John was imprisoned that Jesus began his ministry. He invited people in a different direction; he said to follow him. Jesus reminded people of the light that Isaiah had spoken of in today's first reading. He proclaimed, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Jesus brought the kingdom of heaven to earth. Paul, in our second reading from Corinthians, reminds us that we are not followers of people, but we are to follow Jesus and know the power of God.

Sometimes, like when I had to take an exit and turn in the opposite direction on the interstate to find where I needed to be, we have to turn away from something. And, like when I turned around and was pointed in the direction to take me to the right exit, sometimes we have to turn toward what is right.

How do we know what is right? Ask ourselves four questions. The first, and most important is, "Does it agree with scripture?" If scripture contradicts itself on the subject, which you will find it quite often does, then which scripture is most compassionate? When you decide that, then you'll know which scripture to follow.

The next step is to ask, "Does it agree with tradition?" There are many places we can find tradition. Most of us have family traditions, and if we don't, we usually create them because traditions are comforting. Church tradition can usually be defined as something that has taken place more than 3 times and it will most likely continue. However, the broader scope of tradition is whether or not it agrees with what has taken place over the years of Christian history. Like celebrating Christmas on December 25th. Or Easter on the Sunday after the first full moon following the first day of spring (the day of the vernal equinox). Tradition sometimes needs to be broken in order to welcome some new ideas, but there are some traditions that are everlasting. When evaluating something it is good to weigh your ideas against tradition.

Then we need to ask ourselves, "Does it make sense, is it reasonable?" When I was a child, I'd ask if I could do something that everyone else I knew was doing. If my mom thought it was a bad idea she'd ask me, "If your friend jumped off the public dock would you?" That was her way of telling me to think things through to a reasonable conclusion.

The fourth question to ask is, "What experience do I have in this area?" That can be added to my mother's idea of following my friends just for the fun of it because if my friend was drowning and I knew how to rescue them, then yes, I'd jump in after them. But I don't think I would be the one with the right skill set, so if there was someone else there who could do the job right, I'd see the right person got the job done. It would make no sense for both of us to

drown if someone there had the right skills, the experience to save someone. Yet we can only gain experience by doing something new, so evaluating our experience versus our ability is something to consider. We may have the ability to do something we have never tried, and the experience would be good for us.

Although these four questions are good to ask in themselves, they need to be considered within the bounds of prayer. Unless we ask the Holy Spirit to guide us in the right direction, to show us the correct answer, we could end up heading in the wrong direction even after asking these questions.

Another option for determining the right answer to our search for the right direction in life may be simply to ask the age old question, "What would Jesus do?" That may seem like a cliché, however think about it. Would Jesus take the actions we take? I'm not asking if Jesus would drive a car, of course he wouldn't, they weren't invented. However, if it meant he could get to more places to spread the gospel to more people I believe he would. But he wouldn't shout at the drivers who were irritating him, like we often find ourselves doing. Following Jesus means to take to heart the ideas, the words, the actions that made Jesus different from the rest of the world.

Jesus would often, when it was dark, go to a place away to pray. Even Jesus needed to take time to communicate with God the Father. Jesus often would forgive sins, sometimes telling the sinner to go and sin no more, but from the cross Jesus asked, "Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing." In all his actions, Jesus acted out of love. Jesus turned things around. Some traditions of the religious elite were more for show and/or to put more emphasis on following the law than they were for the good of the people. Jesus showed the best way by refusing to be drawn into what turned people away rather than drew them into God's presence.

Jesus asks us to come to the light, a scriptural reference to follow the one who came to save us from eternal death. Jesus followed the important Jewish traditions and rejected those that blocked life. Jesus knew what he was doing was reasonable, that in the grand scheme of things it made sense. And Jesus had the experience of living in the heavenly kingdom on which to weigh his actions. Is there any better person to follow than Jesus?
All glory be to God.