

Life Trajectory
22nd Sunday after Pentecost
November 10, 2019
Trinity Bixby
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[Deuteronomy 30:11-20](#) (GNT)

[Luke 10:1-9](#) (NLT)

Consider a baseball – it fits in the palm of your hand, has a certain mass, and you know that if you throw it up into the air, it will come down. When you throw the ball straight up, it's relatively easy to determine where it will come down – just about straight back. When you throw it at an arc, though, there's a lot more variability. And yet, the same force, gravity, is still acting on it in exactly the same way. The trajectory the ball traces after being thrown is usually a parabola, that old favorite graph of math class. Yet, any given pitch of the ball rarely follows that perfect parabola – after all, the pitcher is trying hard to prevent the batter from hitting it! Given that, pitchers throw the ball with different levels of spin, that cause the ball to behave in predictable, but inconsistent patterns. Through intense practice, through intentional obscurity, a good pitcher has an intuitive sense of how to throw the ball to get something close to the path they wanted.

But, put that good pitcher on the moon, and everything they'd learned intuitively goes out the window. Even assuming they are in a suit that doesn't hinder their motion, the different pull of gravity and the lack of air resistance completely changes what they'd be able to do. No curve balls, but the ball will travel faster and farther in low gravity and without air resistance to slow it down. Put that same pitcher on a space station, and it gets even weirder. Now, when the pitcher throws the ball, it can curve and slow down from air resistance – but the pitcher *themselves* will move backwards after throwing the ball, at a fraction of the baseball's speed.

The point of all of this is that the trajectory of the ball seems simple, when almost all the context is removed. But as soon as complications sneak in, it gets

very difficult to predict where the ball will go, even if the pitcher throws it exactly the same way.

Our lives are much like this. In the absence of context, it's "obvious" how our lives should be lived. That's why, looking in on others, we can easily think, "Oh, if only they'd do such and such, their lives would be much better!" And yes, sometimes that clarity is helpful – but only to the point that it is true clarity, true insight. We so often make judgments based on what we would do if we were in the situation of the other person – and sometimes, that's good, but often, we don't know the whole story, and end up assuming that our contexts are *always the same*. In the same way, when we read stories from the Bible, we can easily assume that we can see the right path that people 2000 years ago should have followed. Except, as we learn more about the context, the situation gets just as confusing as baseball on the moon.

In the Gospel of Luke, we see Jesus sending out the apostles – the 72 apostles, to be precise. They're supposed to wander the region by twos, knock on doors and say, "Peace be with you and your household!" So far, so good. It sounds much like door-to-door evangelism today, mixed with our passing of the peace in worship. "If those who live there are peaceful," Jesus says, "the blessing will stand. If they are not, the blessing will return to you." If there's a town that welcomes the disciples, they're supposed to proclaim, "God's kingdom has come upon you!" – and likewise, if a town doesn't welcome them, they're supposed to say, "God's kingdom has come to you," after shaking the dust from their shoes. Letting go of whatever baggage, or vindictive thoughts, or whatever. Whether accepted or not, their message is that the Kingdom of God is near.

I love that this identifies different contexts – that some will be already filled with God's peace, some will have God's peace come to them in the moment of the invitation, and some will not yet have felt God's peace. Yet, in every case, God's Kingdom is near. We could spend decades talking about the Kingdom of God, what it is, how it works, and so on. But for today, let me point out that the word for

Kingdom in Greek is *Basileia*¹ – rooted in the word “*bas*” meaning “foot.” The *Basileia* is the foot, the base, the foundation. The apostles are saying, then, that God’s support is near to everyone, whether they’ve been filled with God’s peace for years, or are still years away from experiencing that peace.

Jesus is asking the apostles to honor the contextual differences and yet spread the good news: that no matter what trajectory people are on, God is with them, and will welcome them in peace and forgiveness. The apostles are like that baseball pitcher, not knowing whether they’re playing in Tulsa, or Detroit, or even the moon – but knowing that God will guide them, and that the message of peace is important to spread.

And it’s not a complicated message that they bring. Generations earlier, Moses gave a similar simple choice to God’s people, and he started with this wonderful preface:

The command that I am giving you today is not too difficult or beyond your reach. It is not up in the sky. You do not have to ask, “Who will go up and bring it down for us, so that we can hear it and obey it?” Nor is it on the other side of the ocean. You do not have to ask, “Who will go across the ocean and bring it to us, so that we may hear it and obey it?” No, it is here with you. You know it and can quote it, so now obey it!

I love this because you can clearly hear Moses’ frustration. Even if you knew nothing else of the Bible, you could relate to this Moses. And then, he presents the choice: “I am giving you a choice between life and what’s good, and death and what’s wrong.” This choice is more than it appears. Moses, that great prophet, is encouraging people to live their lives according to God – to be filled with God’s peace. That in God’s way leads to prosperity, to growth, to a generally better existence than choosing not to follow God’s way. Moses is pointing out the life trajectory of the whole people – not promising that prosperity will come to each individual, but that together, following and trusting in God, the community will be much better off. Following God, choosing life – it’s about making things better for

¹ βασιλεία

everyone. It's not saying that everything will always be good – but it's telling you that the whole community is the batter, and the pitcher won't be throwing tricky pitches, curveballs and sliders, your way. God pitches are always down the middle of the plate, and we, the batter, are encouraged to work together to hit the ball, instead of looking away, being distracted by other variables.

Because, here's the other thing about choosing life. Choosing to follow God, instead of turning away from God. The more we get in the habit of doing things according to God's plan, the easier it is to make the choice going forward. Whether we're moving around the earth, proclaiming peace to all we encounter – or throwing a baseball in orbit, God's plan for us is for goodness, mercy, peace, and love. The more love in which we act, the more peace that we share – well, that helps more and more people to know that God's loving support is there with us. It helps bring us together, in unity, when the world tries to draw us apart – not deleting our differences, but embracing them as parts of the greater whole.

Sundays, when we gather and worship together – well, they're our scrimmage time. A chance to train in doing God's work, in building up our spiritual intuition, in preparing for our regular season of following God's trajectory for our lives.

May you train well, always knowing God's loving presence. May you play well, sharing the Peace of Christ with all you meet. May you learn well, that the Spirit of God will guide you into an intuition of God's plan for you. Amen.