

## Two Ways

Officially this is the last Sunday in the season which the church celebrates as belonging to the time when the risen Lord remained among his disciples. Just a few days ago the church calendar marks the time when Jesus led them outside the city gates of Jerusalem, bade them a final good-bye, told them to return to the city and wait there for the coming of the promised Advocate to empower them for the mission they were to assume. Next Sunday, we will celebrate that arrival which coincided with the traditional Jewish festival of Pentecost, and which we still celebrate with that name as the time when the Holy Spirit arrived and moved the disciples out of that upper room into the public square to witness to the truth of the risen LORD. Thus it is also known as the birthday of the church. Today's lectionary readings continue our journey in both looking forward and backward at the changes these disciples are being asked to make in their understandings of their world and the task they have been given. The gospel reading from John gives us Jesus' intercessory prayer made just before he leads them out into the Garden on the night of his betrayal. The language of the prayer is difficult and somewhat obtuse with Jesus' references to being no longer in the world, and coming to the Father while praying to the Father on behalf of those he has chosen to continue his mission. This prayer lifted on behalf of others to establish a relationship between them and the Father is called Jesus' high priestly prayer. In it Jesus establishes his claim on the disciples, asks for the Father's protection for them, and then proclaims they are to be sent them into the world even though they do not belong to the world because they belong to him. This is a thread that runs through much of our scriptures and traditions—this duality of being claimed and sent, of belonging to God and therefore called to be apart from the world while remaining within it. In the earliest days of the church, the communities of believers were not known as Christians. Indeed, they were still largely communities meeting within synagogues or as time passed and more were from households not originally of Jewish heritage—they formed into groups who were simply meeting in homes. As time passed and they were actually barred from the synagogues—they became known as Followers of the Way—with the way being understood as the way that Jesus had taught. These teachings were gathered together and known as the Didache, or the Lord's Teaching, or the Two Ways. These gathered teachings were for many of those early communities the guiding principles for their lives together. The first psalm in the psalter which is the gathered source of praise and lament used for worship by the Hebrew people for centuries begins not with either of those two things, but a piece from what is known as wisdom literature. The first Psalm which is our lectionary psalm today, is as an introduction to a book of worship hymns begins much like the teachings used among the early followers of the risen Lord. It begins with the concept, or the vision, if you will, that there are two ways—two paths—two choices—for the lives that will be lived. And the psalmist makes it clear that the two choices which are made will have two definitely different outcomes. When we read that first psalm, depending upon what translation into English you have before you, you might gain a different understanding of just what is being conveyed. The Hebrew word is *ash'ray*, which can and is translated into English in two ways—which considering the fact the psalm is presenting “two ways” as a theme can complicate the understanding of the meaning. The two English translations which begin the psalm are either “Happy” or “Blessed” are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of

scoffers; but their delight is in the Law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.” This is the first choice—the one to delight in the Law of the Lord—where here law actually means Torah which despite our tendency to view it as restrictive regulation really means teachings. So first point of comparison to the early followers of the risen Lord...psalm 1 also calls on meditating on the teachings of the Lord; to taking delight and joy in studying what the Lord has taught and then following that way. The early believers and the writer of the first psalm had no qualms about dividing the world into either/or into black or white situations; of being for or against—and in many ways our society is still very good at it, except we seem to have forgotten what the basis for the choices is to be. If we go back to that very first word choice for the first verse—“happy or blessed” are those. Most of the earlier translations used the term “blessed” which although a possible translation is not exactly a good understanding. Usually Baruk is the Hebrew word translated as blessed and it conveys a benediction given; whereas the word used here—ash’ray has more the sense of fortunate or indeed, happy is the one who...This is more like a beatitude...a statement...a declaration that someone is fortunate because of something they possess or because of something they have done. The use of ash’ray here celebrates that those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread will be happy or fortunate. Delighting in the Lord’s teachings thus holds out the promise of bringing happiness. The psalmist is clear about wanting to instruct about which way is the way to life. Not only is the path of the sinners to be avoided, but there is a warning about walking/standing in the counsel of the wicked, or sitting in the assembly of scoffers. The psalmist is not naïve because sin can insinuate itself into one’s life slowly, seeming at first like harmless pleasure. Surely it wouldn’t hurt to just walk in the path for awhile to see where it leads. Surely it would hurt to just stand by and watch for a while with those who scoff. They are, after all, attractive, witty, sophisticated people who get a lot of followers on social media. Listening to them, sitting in their assembly, warns the psalmist can lead to being forgetful of what is life-giving. The psalmist paints the picture of those who follow the way as being like trees planted by streams of water which yield fruit in their season, which prosper in all that they do. The contrast is then to the wicked who are like chaff that the wind blows away and do not bear fruit. Two ways...yes, there are two ways, but the trick has always been to discern exactly the one true way in the midst of this world where it seems that there is no clear straight path. Following the way...the teachings of Jesus is the way to which will lead to being like that tree planted by waters...nourished by the living water of the provided in baptism and call. But as written in Psalm One, this fortunate outcome...this happiness cannot be reduced to a mechanical process of following a set of rules, for which one is duly rewarded. Instead, the happiness...the delight which comes is a dynamic process that involves—indeed requires—constant meditation—day and night—upon God’s will in order to discern what God would have us to do in any and every situation, In short, as Jesus would later summarize the Torah, happiness derives from discerning what it means at all times and in all places to “love the Lord you God with all you heart, and with all you soul, and with all you mind...and ... you neighbor as yourself.” These teachings are found in Matthew 22:37-39, Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18. And as we have journeyed through Acts these last few weeks, the disciples discovered that discerning what the Holy Spirit called upon them to do was not always, or even usually, going to fit into their expectations...just as God’s vision of the way of redemption did not match their expectations. In all these things, there are two ways...the ways of our God which call for us to

love one another without fear or barrier and go where we are led so that we may all live abundantly and that other way. God loves and enables so we are indeed ash'ray. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.