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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
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Matthew 11:2-15
“Recalculating Life”

Imagine that you are driving around Pittsburgh, heading somewhere that you’ve only been to once or twice before, and you make a wrong turn and get lost. (I’m sure this has happened to one or two of you . . .). You make a wrong turn; so what is the next thing you hear? For many of us, you hear the voice of a GPS device saying the word, “Recalculating.” GPS devices have become extremely popular in the past few years. They help us get from one point to another, ideally, in an efficient manner; or help us find places we need to go. Based on recent data, the top three destinations programmed into GPS units are WalMart, Starbucks, and Target. Yet, no matter where you are heading, for a variety of reasons ranging from road construction, to heavy traffic, to just being distracted, we have all taken wrong turns or missed our exit and, if using a GPS device, have been told that the unit is now “recalculating” a new route for us.

The GPS desire to get us back on the right track is similar to the work of all Christian prophets. The preaching of John the Baptist or of Jesus often focused on naming how people have strayed from the path they should be following. They offered the voice crying out in the wilderness, “I see where you are and where you’re going; here’s the way you should go instead, if you want to reach your destination.” Driving anywhere means that you are making hundreds of little decisions: choosing lanes, adjusting your speed, stopping for traffic lights, signaling and making turns – hundreds of them every time you get behind the steering wheel. The life of faith is the same. You shape your day through hundreds of little choices: where you go, who you talk to, how you talk with them, what you say and do, and the consequences of those words and actions. When we go astray, our moral GPS says “Recalculating” and encourages us to make things right. When we veer off the path we should travel, our faith GPS calls us back to what the prophet Isaiah called “God’s highway” or the “Holy Way” (Isa 35:8). Because that’s where we are supposed to be if we wish to reach destinations in the kingdom of God.

John the Baptist himself had some of those “recalculation” moments. He was in prison, having been arrested by Herod the Not So Great; and while he was there, his followers brought him reports about the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. John had been outspoken about getting people on the right road for kingdom of God destinations. He had warned them, challenged them, and baptized them to direct them onto that Holy Way. But now he was behind bars and unsure what the next chapter looked like. He was recalculating and wondering if this Jesus was the real thing, the guide for the journey around which everyone’s GPS should be calibrated. John needed to be sure. Even when the evidence is pretty overwhelming – in this case, the blind saw again, the lame walked, the deaf heard, the dead were now alive – we still have strong instincts to second-guess the faith maps spread out before us and to believe we know a better route to where we’re going.

If we’re honest with ourselves, we argue a lot with faith “recalculations” for our lives just like we argue with GPS devices when they “recalculate” things for us. We turn off the

GPS; we stop going to church. We re-program the machine around the route we want to follow; we come up with our own list of Ten Commandments and our own highway to heaven. There was no standardized checklist for recognizing the Messiah back in the days of John the Baptist. That was why he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another?" Likewise, there is no absolute textbook on how to live the life of authentic faith, which is part of the reason we have so many denominations and churches, and why Christians spend so much time arguing and studying and church-shopping.

Fortunately, in today's passage, there is guidance on criteria that you can use when recalculating your own journey of faith. Officially today's reading was supposed to end at verse 10, where Jesus said of John, "*This is the one about whom it is written, 'Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you.'*" In the next verse, Jesus goes further and says, "*Truly I tell you, among those born of woman no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he*" (Mt 11:11). All things are to be measured against the standards of the kingdom of God, for even the least participant of God's realm surpasses the greatest participant in this world's life. Therefore, we should measure all words, actions and plans against God's standards, commandments, and promises. That sounds good, but it is still a bit abstract. Luckily the next verse helps us be more specific in our "re-calculation."

Verse 12: "*From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.*" One of the longstanding tenets of our faith is that with God and through God, there is release for those in captivity. It goes back to the book of Exodus, when the Hebrew people were in slavery in Egypt and Moses was sent explicitly to tell Pharaoh "*Let God's people go!*" It goes back to the prophet Isaiah, who said, "*Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong; do not fear! Here is your God. He will come and save you'*" (Isa 35:4). It is there in Jesus' own answer to the disciples of John the Baptist: "*Go and tell John what you hear and see: the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the poor have good news brought to them*" (Mt 11:5). It was then in the work of Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Martin Luther King, Jr. It was the liberation message at the heart of Mahatma Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Oscar Romero and Cesar Chavez.

Jesus is pointing to the marker of violence – all attempts to wound or destroy the kingdom of God by violent means. He could point to John the Baptist being in prison and who would soon be beheaded. Jews were facing persecution then, something which sadly would continue down through the centuries. The early Christians suffered persecution from zealots like the Pharisee Saul, who later became the apostle Paul; and the vocabulary of martyrdom has filled the pages of church history from the time of Nero's persecution to the recent massacres in Sudan, Iraq and Palestine.

If you want to recalculate your faith, look at where there is violence and go the other way. Look where there is violence and resist it, oppose it, seek to change it at all costs. Theologian Eugene Peterson has put it most succinctly: "The history of violence is a history of failures. There has never been a won war. There has never been a victorious battle. The use of force destroys the very reality that [it seeks to save], whether honor,

truth, or justice . . . Even when [violence] is inevitable, it is not right; God does not engage in it.”¹

Violence is what you do when you can't think of anything else to do. Violent action is the antithesis of creative action.² Let me give a mundane illustration from the sports world. The University of Oregon's football team is called the Ducks. They wear yellow and green uniforms. They should not inspire fear in any opponents, but they do. They're undefeated this year and will play Auburn for the national championship. Football has been played for so long that you wouldn't think anyone could come up with a new strategy. But the Ducks' coach, Chip Kelly, did just that. If you put a small running back carrying a football up against a 300-lb. defensive lineman, it is an obvious mismatch. But what if you don't walk back to the line of scrimmage when the play is over, but you run back? What if you don't spend 30 or 40 seconds between plays, but only 5 or 10 seconds? Pretty soon the 300-lb. defender is gasping for oxygen, and you can run right around him, allowing the score to run up to 69-0, 60-13, or 53-16, as has happened this season. The Ducks are not more violent than their opponents; they simply used their imagination to find another way to win.

Violence is too often accepted as a necessary part of life, even as we get ready to welcome the one called “The Prince of Peace.” We too easily accept that prison is the answer for millions in our population; that as many as 1 in 5 women in America, many before they are 21 years old, will be victims of attempted or completed rape; or that, according to the Children's Defense Fund, every year 3,000 children and teens are killed by gunfire in America. That is eight kids a day. We accept violent war as an appropriate tool of statecraft, and see spending over \$900 billion in Iraq and \$6-7 billion every month in Afghanistan as an effective allocation of our resources.

St. Ignatius, one of the early Apostolic Fathers, said, “Force is no attribute of God” and he's correct. Recalculating our lives around the variable of non-violence is the quickest way to get back on the road to the realm of God. It is not being unrealistic to seek to live out a spirit of pacifism. It is not being impractical to insist that we find ways to reach our goals that do not involve violence. It is not being illogical to call for an end to so many punitive solutions to life's crises, nor is it too idealistic to say that the current levels of violence against women and children, whether on foreign soil or Pittsburgh city streets, are simply unacceptable.

John wanted a litmus test to determine if Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus said, “*Tell John what you see.*” The world questions whether Christianity is another cause of war or a bringer of solutions. In your own lives, use the simple marker of abstaining from all violence – seek creative alternatives to violence – lift up your voice on behalf of victims of violence. And when we do that, then we will have recalculated ourselves and our world, with Christ's help, back to the road on which we truly belong.

AMEN

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Where Your Treasure Is*, pp. 79-80.

² *Ibid.*