

The Crossroads of Life

Mark 8:27-38

When three young men from Brooklyn were arrested this past week on their way to join ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) in Syria, it was a rare setback in the recruiting efforts of this notorious terrorist enterprise. The more common reality was illustrated a few days earlier by the three British high school aged girls who successfully traveled through Turkey and were smuggled into Syria. Over the past year, hundreds, if not thousands, of western young adults have been recruited by ISIL to join them in the fight in Syria and Iraq, or are being radicalized and trained to return to their homelands ready to sacrifice lives—their own, as well those of innocent civilians—all for this extreme ideological cause.

For most Americans, it's hard to make sense of this. Many of us wonder what would compel young men and women to leave the safety of their homes and families to join in such a brutally heinous crusade led by a merciless band of outlaw thugs who have perverted Islamic teachings in order to justify their own violent rebellion. Why are young people drawn to radical jihadists, whether it's with ISIL, al Qaeda, Al Shabab, or some other terrorist group?

Experts tell us recruiters largely prey on disaffected youth who are attracted to slick online propaganda, romanticizing ISIL's fight against the world as a righteous cause worthy of one's life. Young people who want to find their destiny and meaning in larger-than-life causes (and often who are among a marginal immigrant population) will be particularly vulnerable to this global salespitch. They feel like

outsiders in the society in which they live and so are searching for a community and cause that offers them greater purpose and value.

This matches the most familiar profile for recruits to terrorism (as well as for religious cults, mind you): disaffected, marginalized youth, searching for a meaningful purpose. As a result, new efforts have been made around the world by Muslims, community leaders, law enforcement, and others to address this ongoing social problem among immigrant populations—one of the more effective programs having been developed in Minneapolis among Somali-Americans.¹

However, this profile doesn't account for those like Mohammad Emwazi (alias Jihadi John), who has been the most odious personification of ISIL, serving as the judge and executioner of hostages in brutal beheadings that have become the trademark of ISIL terror. As more information about him has surfaced over the last few days, we are told he was pretty much a middle class young man, with no record of delinquency to speak of or social marginalization that was apparent; he was educated in the British system up through university level with sufficient employable skills to make a decent living.

So it's a puzzle: why would someone like Emwazi become so radicalized and violent? The same might be said about Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, one of the Boston Marathon bombers currently on trial who, as well, was assimilating normally into American society before he became a cold-blooded killer. What went wrong? What caused

¹ A model program was developed in Minneapolis in addressing Somali-American youth who has been seduced by Islamic extremism, organized by local imams, Somali elders, parents, youth groups, and law enforcement (“Minnesota uses Outreach Program to Combat ISIL Recruiting”, *Star Tribune*, Feb. 16, 2015).

such a radical turn from pursuing a mainstream college education toward becoming one of the most ruthless terrorists of our time?

Criminal motives, of course, are always difficult to discern, let alone declare with any certainty, as any prosecutor will admit. So it's unlikely we will ever know what motivated Emwazi or Tsarnaev, and others like them. But one fundamental truth of life is known: no one becomes who they are in life—for evil purposes or for good—without making a choice toward that end. Outside influences contribute to a choice, but nothing is predetermined without an individual's freedom to choose his or her actions or responses. Even then, after a path has been chosen, further choices are made down the line that will either reinforce an earlier decision and action or reverse it. As a rule, no single decision determines who anyone is or what anyone is like until it gets reinforced repeatedly over time. That's why we hope for remorse and repentance in lives gone bad (and why Quakers created "penitentiaries" in this country)—to help people reverse previous actions that they later regret, so that they and others don't have to become victims of their own poor choices.

That said, no one is driven to be violent apart from some voluntary commitment to be this way; no real excuses exist to entirely explain away behavior that harms another. Conversely (and this is important to note), none of us can intentionally be good unless we choose to be this way. Our actions, attitudes, and outlooks may be conditioned and influenced by our upbringing or environments for better or for worse, but in the end, in the moment, each person makes a choice of what they will say, or do, or how they will respond to provocation or circumstances. It's a choice people make. As

logotherapist Viktor Frankl put it in the wake of Nazi atrocities: *Everything can be taken from a [person] but one thing: the last of human freedoms - to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.* Frankl was absolutely right: in a will to find meaning, we make our choices.

However, the way life often plays out is that far too many people are lazy and careless when it comes to decision-making, resulting in poor decisions being made because they have not been well thought out, or the consequences considered, or wisdom employed. Lazy choices leave people vulnerable to outside influences that may be manipulative, even by those pretending to have their best interests at heart. Instead of making a wise, thoughtful choice, they are persuaded or pushed into doing something that they don't fully own or feel committed to, or even later regret—choices that are made to merely please another, or to meet a perceived need, or to avoid confrontation and conflict. Lazy choices are rarely the best choices. In fact, it's interesting to see how many ISIL recruits are discovering life under ISIL rule isn't so appealing or glorious—why some are now trying to escape from Syria and return home.

As high as the stakes are, regret is understandable. For any of us, it probably isn't hard to look back on our lives and have a sense of what were good decisions we've made and which ones weren't—which were well thought out and those that were fairly lazy and careless. Yet, each choice has made us what we are today, whether we embrace it or live with some regret. To a person, when the stakes are high (particularly at the crossroads of life), the decisions we want to make are those we can commit to with the hope and expectation that the

results will be good for us and for others. For that's often how we, as human beings, measure the value of our lives.

Perhaps for this reason, our lectionary text for today is about making an authentic choice, as it lies at the hinge of Mark's Gospel—halfway through the narrative and right before Jesus' fateful journey to Jerusalem. Up to this point in the story, following Jesus appeared to be fairly easy, given that there was much to rally around. Jesus was popular and the message was positive. People were being healed, restored, fed, taught, challenged and blessed. Any opposition to what Jesus stood for was fairly minimal and kept at a distance. All those associated with the Jesus movement were enthusiastic and excited about what was yet to come. It was a God moment! However, from this point forward everything would change. For the last eight chapters of Mark's telling of the Gospel, it would be dramatically different—the glamour of the Gospel cause was becoming tarnished by reality.

For Jesus and for his disciples, it was a moment of truth at the crossroads of their lives. Jesus understood what was at stake; the disciples likely didn't and therefore they were easily swayed by varying popular impressions of what Jesus' whole mission was about. Was Jesus, John the Baptist Jr.? He certainly stood in John's shadow in the minds of many. Some thought Jesus was even greater—as the redux of Elijah, the larger-than-life, mythical prophet of Israel's history who rose to the heavens on a chariot!

Simon Peter, though, spoke boldly on behalf of the rest of the disciples, proclaiming Jesus to be more significant than that. Jesus was the Messiah—the long-awaited anointed one of God! Except, the

disciples' messianic impressions were rather naïve and religiously romantic, not grounded in the realities of the time. From this moment forward, not only for Jesus, but for the early church as well, claiming Jesus to be Lord and Messiah would come with a dear, painful price. More often than not, it would cost them their lives.

Admittedly, that's not something you and I think about too often living in a fairly safe place for religious beliefs. No one will threaten our welfare and good fortune if we confess our Christian faith. There are plenty of cynics out there who dismiss the value of religion, but this isn't a real threat to our lives. That's why when we refer to having our cross to bear, everyone understands that as meaning we have a load of care and some heavy burdens.

There's little cost to identifying ourselves as Christian, certainly in comparison to others around the world, such as the Egyptian Coptics who were recently martyred at the hands of ISIL militants. Now that's a cost and a cross that many of us can't fathom. Is following a particular religion really worth the loss of your life? Isn't it more prudent to simply keep it to yourself and go about your business avoiding conflict? That's the choice many people make, which is understandable. But, honestly, that tends to be a lazy choice, doesn't it? It's a safe choice—but one which reflects our surroundings more than the convictions of our faith.

And that's why Jesus wasn't asking for safe, lazy choices to follow him. There is something to be said about true conviction and loyalty to one's faith. At the crossroads of life, we often have to make choices not only about who we are, but *whose* we are. We might not have our life threatened, but we often can lose our grip on what is

most important if we are not wise and thoughtful about our choices. Again, every decision we make in life adds up to something—it leads us somewhere. Every choice we are committed to reflects in some way what we ultimately value and what we consider true and meaningful. Life adds up to the choices we make and how we live and what we live for. It's as simple and as difficult as that!

So when Jesus told his disciples in the midst of their enthusiasm over who he was that they had to take up their crosses to follow him from this point forward, he was forcing them to make an authentic choice. No room for lazy choices anymore. No longer would his wisdom seem conventional, popular, and easy to follow. Instead, what a person believes, what they value, what they desire, what they aspire to, how they conduct themselves and what they do will matter!

If we choose Jesus' way, we will follow him to a cross that comes to us in some form as the cost for speaking truth to power, or by bucking the trend, or by going the extra mile, or by doing what's right when it's easier not to. Or, we will stop following him so closely because it costs us too much in our workplace, among our circles of friends, in the public square, or in the politics of our lives. At this point in the narrative of life, there's no room for lazy choices. It's a choice that requires conscientious, thoughtful intentionality. You are either with him or without him, because when you are at the crossroads of life, *you can't go both ways*.

In a strange, nefarious way, I have to think ISIL recruiters are fully aware of the cost they will exact upon their followers—doing great evil under the illusion of doing good. I have to believe they prey

on those who don't know what they're getting themselves into. Nor do those who go to Syria get to waver; in many cases, their lives are lost right from the moment they choose to join them. It will be a careless, lazy choice that some recruits later regret. But there will be those like Mohammad Emwazi, who knew exactly what he committed himself to—a choice to kill every time he picks up a knife.

The choice to follow Christ is meant to be no less authentic and convincing, except it is a choice to do quite the opposite—to love, instead of hate; to make peace instead of war, to heal instead of harm, to give up one's life in greater service to humanity. But even doing good requires a level of intentionality and commitment that casual believers can't fully embrace. That's why there truly is a cost to discipleship—the deliberate, thoughtful commitment we make to be like Jesus, as nearly and as authentically and consistently as we can be.

This is what it means to be a Christian. That's what is intended when we are immersed in the baptizer's waters. May it be a choice we've already made, and one we are continuing to make, at every juncture, every opportunity, and every crossroad of life.

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