

THE FORK IN THE ROAD

August 15, 2021

Rev. Lori Fleming

Rev. Lori Fleming: So this morning we're going to talk about getting second chances and making choices and what you have to choose. Should you go left? Should you go right? Should you stay where you are? We have this innate, internal guidance system that will also direct us to the right way.

My talk is entitled, "The Fork in the Road." Yogi Berra said, "*If you see a fork in the road, take it.*"
[Congregation laughs] Silly; very silly!

There's this little country church, and the first Sunday of every month the church ladies put on a potluck social. And they come early, and they get out the plates. And they take the silverware and they roll them up in a napkin, and tie them with a little bow. And when people come in, they get a plate and they get their silverware, and they go down the line, and they pick the food that they want. And they sit down and eat. But they don't pick the dessert! The church ladies come around; they pick up their plate, their knife and their spoon, and they say, "*Keep your fork.*" And then they hand them a little plate with a little sample of all the desserts, so they get to taste all the pies and the cakes and the brownies. I think that's a great way to do dessert!

So this particular Sunday morning, they're rolling the silverware, and they discover they only have 49 forks, and they usually make up 50. And the two oldest matriarchs look at each other with a smile. And the youngest one said, "*I'm sure that we had 50 the last time we did this.*" And the matriarchs said, "*Yes, we did; but, you see, Ethel died last week. And every time one of our church ladies dies, we put a fork in their coffin. Because everyone knows that, when you get to heaven, you get to eat all the dessert you want, and you don't gain weight!*" [Congregation laughs]

I'm sticking to that one! [Rev. Fleming and congregation laugh]

So you know how Rev. Maraj does his "Songs of Life" series? Well, this morning I'm doing "Poetry of Life." And the poem I've chosen is the Robert Frost poem, "The Road Not Taken." You may remember that. It goes like this:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—*

*I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

You may have read that poem in high school. I did! I've always loved nature; I'm happy when I'm outdoors. For me, being outdoors is a spiritual experience that I feel closer to God. Whether it's in the Midwestern woods in the spring where the trillium are blooming, or whether it's in the Midwestern woods in the fall with all the beautiful fall colors, or whether I'm hiking up at Desert Mountain ... nature makes me feel closer to God.

This morning, we're going to look at this famous poem, knowing that life is all about choices: those taken, those not taken. So the poem starts like this:

Two roads diverged in the yellow wood

Now, the number two always means duality: up, down; in, out; over, under; good and evil. Two means duality. So the road forks and the speaker has to make a choice: do we take the left fork? Do we take the right fork? Do we stand still and not do anything? Or do we turn around and go home?

The road is in a yellow wood, so it must be fall, and the trees have those beautiful golden leaves. Well, I grew up in the Midwest, and I love the beautiful fall colors. Right after Labor Day, I'll drag out all my fall decorations. I have a cornucopia, and I put these pumpkins and gourds and silk leaves ... and red and orange and brown and yellow. Put it on my dining room table; it's really pretty. I love fall because it's a season when things come to fruition. Everything that was planted in the spring – that we've tended all summer – is now beginning to produce fruit.

So the leaves in the forest in the poem were yellow or gold. Gold, metaphysically, represents spiritual gifts or riches of the spirit. Gold is pure; it's inert. It's unchanging. Gold is valuable; it represents prosperity. Remember when the Magi brought the Christ child gold and frankincense and myrrh? I always thought those were kind of strange things to bring a baby! Normally, when somebody has a baby, I bring them baby booties or a bib or those little onesies, you know ... or maybe a rattle. Gold seems like: that's kind of strange. But the Magi were bringing baby Jesus the gift of spiritual substance; the gift of prosperity. The gift of abundance.

The poem goes on like this:

*And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood*

Who's the speaker in this poem? Is it the author? Or is it the reader? If it's the author, it's just a musing about someone who has to make a decision that doesn't really affect us, and we might not even care! But if it's the reader – if it's us in the poem – it brings us into the poem in a very personal way. We're forced to think about which way to go; we're forced to make a decision. We have to choose which fork to take, and we can't choose both.

If we choose one, we may feel regret, because we didn't choose the other. The speaker feels sorrow at not being able to travel both. Perhaps the speaker will miss something: something important. Ahhhh, the dilemma! This sets up the struggle for the poem's main theme: the role of choice and uncertainty in life, and how we navigate that uncertainty.

We know that we must make choices every single day ... sometimes many in a day. And we may not know how the choices are going to turn out. We never ever have all the information we need at the time that we make a choice to make a perfect choice; we can only use the information we have at hand. And then we may get angst over our decision, playing the choices over and over and over in our mind, sometimes ad nauseam. Rationalizing, planning, evaluating, re-evaluating or maybe even procrastinating! Because if we wait long enough, somebody will make the choice for us! And then it won't be our fault; and then we can play the victim.

The speaker stands paralyzed for a long time, wrestling with the dilemma of which fork to take. Making a choice is painful sometimes, because every choice presents a possibility of the lost opportunity to travel both paths, or experience both things. In our own lives, there are many times we have to choose. We might have to choose whether we stay in a relationship with a partner or a friend, or not. We might have to choose whether we have the medical test our doctor's recommending, or not. We may choose to stay in our job – in a dead-end job we don't like – or not. We may find a new one.

Sometimes having to make a choice paralyzes us. It brings us fear, anxiety or a deep sense of dread. What if we make the wrong decision? What are the consequences of our decision? Are they short-term or long-term? Can we change our mind if we make a decision we don't like? Yes! We can. You always get a do-over to make a different choice. Will we regret not taking the other fork? We don't seem to know what to do. So the poem goes on:

*And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

I can imagine standing there, looking at the two forks. Maybe getting up on tiptoe trying to look around the bend. Analyzing, pondering, evaluating, wondering with the undergrowth obscuring the path: trying to gather as much information as I can. But the bend in the road won't let me see around it into the woods.

What do we do when we cannot see enough of the path ahead to know which one is the right choice? When we have to choose one and not the other? Do we wonder for days or weeks or months after the decision whether we made the correct choice? But think about it! No matter what choice we make, we may experience a deep regret that we missed out on something: something big. It's something we'll never know.

And the underlying truth that's unspoken in the poem is: there will always be a fork not taken. We'll always have that unshakable feeling of regret because we don't know what we missed. The speaker tries to get further information about what's the best way. And then the speaker makes a decision.

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

So the speaker's trying to evaluate ... make some kind of an evaluation about which road is best. But they look pretty equal. But wait! One was more grassy than the other, suggesting it's not used very much. Some of us would prefer to do the one not used very much, and others of us would go on the one that looked safe. Which one are you?

Why is it more grassy? Because not people have walked on it. Is that because the people know that it's not the best way to go? Or does it take longer to get to their destination, so the people who live there don't use it? Or maybe there's danger there that the native people know about and avoid. Maybe the trail is steeper and more strenuous. We just don't know!

The speaker decides that they're pretty similar ... So how do you choose if they're both the same?

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

The speaker can't really tell which one is less traveled. They seem to be the same, because both of them have not been traveled enough so that the leaves have been trodden on, and turned black. The speaker

eventually chooses the second fork and leaves the first for another time. But, sadly, the speaker knows that one fork leads to another and, by making a choice, the speaker may never get to experience the first road. And will never truly know which one was less traveled.

The speaker tries to assuage the regret and pain of not traveling both by saying, *"I'll leave it for another day."* But truthfully, none of us can ever be sure that we'll be in this place again.

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

In this final stanza, the speaker's looking back from a long time in the future. Reminiscing, perhaps sadly, yet tells us that taking the one less traveled has made all the difference. Unfortunately, we're not told what the difference is, and we – as the reader – have to muddle that out for ourselves. But the final line elicits a response from us as a reader: *"I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference."* The response that we feel could be kind of like the "half empty/half full" glass: some of us would take it positively; some of us would take it negatively, depending on what's in our hearts and consciousness.

I think that this last line is the reason people still read this poem today. The poem would make so much less impact if we were told what the actual difference really is. We have to think about it; we have to put what's in our heart into the poem.

This poem is about making choices. We have to make choices every single day. And we have to make them with the information that we have at hand in the moment; we can never fully have all the information that we need. Every choice that we have to make creates an ending, and every choice we have to make creates a beginning. Not knowing and wondering what the untraveled path was like keeps the speaker from knowing if they made the right choice. The doubt that was created can be debilitating. It can cause us to freeze up and have us avoid making decisions in the future: cause us to second-guess the decisions we have made.

This poem is a metaphor about divergent roads that symbolize the variety of choices in life. We truly do live in a smorgasbord! No one can see what the future holds. No one can see what lies ahead on every path. This poem illustrates that, as we live our lives, we travel forward in this linear way. We may never have the opportunity to backtrack and go down the path we were not able to travel.

The diverging forks in the road symbolize all of life's choices: the easy, the hard, the painful, the joyful. This poem is about the confusion we may feel when we have to make a choice in the moment when we really feel like we don't have the information we need.

It reminds us of the painful impossibility of foreseeing all the possible consequences of our choices ahead of time. If we know the consequences ahead of time, we can make better choices. But we don't always know the consequences ahead of time. We know that, when we look back over our lives, those choices have defined our ways in ways we never could have expected.

Fortunately, we have this internal guidance system to help us make all the decisions of life. Each and every one of us have it! We call it **intuition**: that "knowing." Have you ever had one of those "knowings" that you're like: *"Oh, yeah; I know that's what I'm supposed to do without a doubt! I am as clear as I can be!"* Yes!

This intuition is unfailing. It's true. It's always there when we need it. If we don't know what to do, or if I lose something, I have a statement I say; you can use this, too! Somebody told me this morning they were going to steal it; I'll just give it to you! [*Congregation laughs*] Here it is! The statement is: *"God knows and God shows."* I've been using this for a long time; I don't even remember where it came from,

but I say it. I say, *“God knows and God shows,”* and then I close my eyes, I stop, and I wait until my intuition gives me some kind of direction. It could be a thought; it could be a word. Somebody might hand me something.

This is especially useful for me when I leave the house in the morning, and I want to make sure that I have everything I need to come into work. I stop at the door to the garage. I mentally go through the mental list of everything I need: you know, my purse, all that kind of stuff. I never worry about my car keys because, when I get in my car, it won't start if I don't have the keys. *[Congregation laughs]* So I never forget them!

However, I have been known to forget things: you know, your phone. Don't you just hate it when you forget your phone? We know that sometimes you have that “knowing” that you're forgetting something while you're standing there. *“I just know; what am I forgetting? My phone? No, I have that. Oh, my water bottle! Yes, I need my water bottle! Okay; God knows and God shows. Anything else? Oh, yeah! I forgot! I'm supposed to bring a book for somebody! Okay; God knows and God shows. Is there anything else? [Pause] Nope! I think I've got it. Okay!”* Every time I do that, suddenly something will pop into my mind, and I won't forget anything.

Florence Shim says that prayer is telephoning to God, and intuition is God telephoning to us. Prayer is telephoning to God, and intuition is God telephoning to us. Saying, *“God knows and God shows”* is a prayer telephoning God.

So the next time you have to make a decision, or the next time you need to remember something ... Or maybe you've even misplaced something. I use *“God knows and God shows”* to find things I've lost: you know, like my glasses; usually they're on my head, but ... *[Congregation laughs]* You know! Works great!

Stop, close your eyes, and say, *“God knows and God shows,”* and then simply wait for the inspiration of your intuition to provide you with the answer. Wait for God to telephone you!

The next time you're in a yellow woods – maybe in a couple of months drive up to Flagstaff or Sedona, when the trees are changing up there – and you come to a fork in the road, and you don't know which way to go ... You don't need to get out your phone for a GPS or use the GPS in your car. You've got GKGS. What's GKGS? God knows and God shows!

So stop; take a breath. Say, *“God knows and God shows,”* and then wait. And I promise that God will telephone you with the next right and perfect thing.

Thank you!

Copyright 2021 Unity of Phoenix Spiritual Center/Rev. Lori Fleming