

## AMBIVALENCE OR CHOICE

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
September 25, 2005

Psalm 78: 1-4, 12-16  
Matthew 21: 23-32

We have a lot of ambivalence evident in today's gospel reading.<sup>i</sup> The chief priests and elders in the temple argue with one another about how to answer Jesus's question about the baptism of John. They can't come to a conclusion and finally respond, "We do not know."<sup>ii</sup> Then there's the man with two sons, each of whom he asks to go work in the vineyard. The first refuses, but then later changes his mind and goes. The second agrees, but then never goes. A Bible commentary I use comments on these verses: "When the yes or no question is pushed... [we often] take refuge in 'we don't know.' [Yet] honest [religious] searching and struggle for the truth must finally decide, take a stand, even if one in some abstract sense still doesn't 'know.'"<sup>iii</sup>

I've spoken with a lot of college students over the years who are spiritually paralyzed inside of their heads. They think, and read, and talk about religion; yet, they are incapable of acting on it. They're afraid of taking risks. "There are always two sides, or many sides, to any question," they opine. "It's hard to choose a religion to get involved with. It's hard to know where to start."<sup>iv</sup> One student (Let's call him Josh) summed up the struggle this way: "The idea of just choosing a [spiritual] path and

going with it is very appealing, but difficult. For me, in order to choose a path I must believe it. I can't see how I could follow a path without believing it. Since at this point I don't really believe in any of them, I must make myself believe one first." Another student, whom I'll call Beth, has beliefs, but can't act on them. She explained to me: "I can think, I can read and I can talk. But I often lose the capacity to act on my beliefs. I know what I have to do, but it is the next step that I have the most trouble with. I don't know if I have the strength to discontinue my procrastination."

My response to Beth and Josh is: Religiously speaking, start anywhere that looks interesting, but start. Act. Do. Make some mistakes and get knocked down. Pull yourself up and start again. Real learning requires an interplay between action and reflection, between heart and head. We do need to pick a path to make spiritual progress. From my perspective, there are many valid spiritual paths. So follow your instincts about what path looks immediately inviting, knowing you can turn back later or veer off onto a better way as you go.

O.K., some students have said to me: How - pragmatically speaking - can I pick that path to start walking on? By putting on a blindfold, spinning around, and pinning hopes on whatever direction in which I happen to stumble? Maybe, but I encourage students to take the hands of friends. Say you know a Christian who has been trying to

get you to attend a Quaker meeting, a Jew who wants to invite you to a Passover Seder, or a Buddhist who would like to teach you how to meditate. Then at least you have companionship and some degree of trust. And seeing the effects of faith in someone else, may open you to try out what they do.

Another approach is simply to start with something that seems intriguing and engaging. Let your heart lead you into something that resonates deep inside you even if it's not the path you know best. There's a big caveat, though. Use your head, along with your heart - Don't abandon your common sense and your judgment, especially when it looks like an approach can be hurtful and damaging to yourself or others. Stay away from paths where someone's pushing you too hard, misleading you, or causing pain. You won't get very far that way.

In the back of our Office for Religious Life brochure, that profiles 30 registered religious groups on campus, we've added a note of warning. We point out that unfortunately not every religious group that tries to get established at Stanford has students' best interests at heart. If an organization has some or all of these five characteristics, we strongly advise avoiding them: pressure, deception, totalitarian worldview, alienation from others, and exploitation.

High pressure recruitment tactics include not taking no for an answer, and actively pursuing students even into dorm

rooms. Deception is most often of the bait-and-switch type: not being up-front about motives when first approaching a student and not identifying the religious group involved. Totalitarian worldviews are held by groups which claim to possess the truth exclusively, which criticize academic objectivity and the scientific method, and which try to be involved in all aspects of one's life, from scholarly pursuits to extracurriculars, often with many contact hours every day. Alienation refers to groups trying to separate students from their old friends and even family members who have different views. Organizations which want to choose all of one's friends are deeply manipulative and dangerous. Finally, there's exploitation: Making unrealistic demands on one's time and money. Beware if a group is asking for financial sacrifice to support them or is asking that one take time away from studies - one's first priority at Stanford -- to participate in their activities.

There's a national evangelical organization with an active group at Stanford which has a code of proselytizing which I find to be very helpful in separating cult-like groups from legitimate organizations. This code respects "the individual integrity, intellectual honesty, and academic freedom of other believers and skeptics." It affirms "the inalienable right of every person to survey other options and to convert to or choose a different belief system." Disavowed is "the use of any coercive technique or manipulative appeals which bypass a person's critical

faculties, play on psychological weaknesses or mask the true nature of Christian conversion." There will be "no false advertising" and "no overly emotional appeals which minimize reason and evidence." The organization will always "reveal our own identity and purpose, our theological position and sources of information, and will not be intentionally misleading." Wanting to relate to people of other religions, it will also "divest our witness of any stereotypes or fixed formulas which are barriers to true dialog."

Getting actively onto a path represented by a tradition, a set of practices, and an understanding of community is critical to making spiritual progress, from my perspective. I like the analogy articulated by one of my students: He explained that if we wander around in a thick forest, picking fruit and nuts off the lower branches of this tree and that, we'll always remain in the dark. Things only begin to brighten up when we pick one tree and actively start climbing, higher and higher. If we're lucky enough to reach the top, we'll see the sky. And that's not to condemn others for climbing different tall trees. For indeed, if we look around above the treeline, we'll realize that others are up there in the light too, at the top of other trees, with very similar views to ours.

A surprising conclusion for many of my students in a college class I taught some years ago on "finding one's religion" is that at the end of the course a number of them

found themselves circling back to the religion of their childhood. As one put it, "I had come to see Judaism as an all-or-nothing proposition. Moving back towards it was the last thing I expected when I took this class. Now I understand that even if I'm not Orthodox like my parents, I can still find a comfortable place within the Jewish tradition." Another wrote in her journal: "Perhaps the most inspiring thing that I have gotten from the class is the idea that it is okay, even beneficial, simply to use the Christian religion that I have grown up with as a starting place. I used to think that I had to explore and understand fully all religions before embarking on my journey; now I realize that this can come as I progress spiritually."

I personally started college as a self-proclaimed atheist, having left my childhood Presbyterianism as supposedly stultifying and hypocritical. A college chaplain urged me actively to pursue the meditation practice and yoga I'd become interested in, and a summer trip to India to live with a Hindu priest ensued. By the end of college, though, I was identifying again as a Christian, as I do today, albeit out of a different institutional base than I grew up with.

John the Baptist is not the final authority in the Christian tradition, but in today's gospel lesson Jesus lauds tax collectors and prostitutes for making the choice to follow this John, who came in the way of righteousness. He condemns those who are publicly ambivalent and who will

not commit to a stance of seeing John's baptisms as having divine or merely human efficacy. Obviously, this story is wrapped up in a larger one of Jesus' struggle with the religious leadership of his time that wants him dead. It addresses the question of John's legitimacy as a prophet in their eyes, as well as Jesus' own role as a prophet.<sup>vi</sup> Yet, I find it useful as a challenge to us today as well: Are we going to get off the couch of ambivalence about religion and start an active practice, or not?

For it's my observation after decades of university chaplaincy that real understanding and appreciation of religion can never come from armchair observation - that is, from study alone. It can only come from walking a path of religious tradition: engaging in its rituals, singing its songs, living its ethical code, and becoming part of its community of faith. One should not be afraid of starting to walk a particular path to the exclusion of others, though, because there'll always be crossroads ahead with new decision points. There will always be new friends and new life experiences and new vistas that open up as one walks. But to sit on one's hands or to stand still, is to go nowhere.

How can we get nearer to God? By setting out, by launching forth, even in the face of danger. By wandering abroad, rather than remaining safe at home. By climbing a stairway to heaven, not by sitting at its base.

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 21: 23-32.

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 21: 27.

<sup>iii</sup> The New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), p. 410.

<sup>iv</sup> Scotty McLennan, *Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), p. 5 (Please note that much of this sermon is derived from the "Walking" chapter of this book, pp. 67-92).

<sup>v</sup> Excerpted from the *InterVarsity Code for Christian Witness* (Madison, Wisconsin: InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, 1998).

<sup>vi</sup> The Oxford Bible Commentary (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 872.