

“Finding a Third Way”

Romans 12:9-21

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It's February 2001 and I am in the middle of the low county, South Carolina. This experience is emblazed in my memory because it was my first day on the job, a real job, as an archaeologist where I was getting paid all of 19,000 dollars a year. For the first time I was finally being paid to work rather than paying to do what I loved. I was assigned to a longtime archaeologist, Inna to show me the ropes. Before we left the office, I was handed a compass on a string that was always worn around my neck for the next few years. She gave me a short tutorial on the basics of compass orienteering that lasted maybe two minutes. I stuffed my pockets with a field journal, plastic bags, and the always trusty sharpie marker. Armed with my screen and shovel we set out to survey this small piece of property for development. I don't remember where exactly we were along the low country or the exact date. What I do remember is Inna saying to me, “Always trust your compass. The compass is never wrong. *Always trust your compass.*”

When we arrived to the tract, Inna told me to follow the compass heading of 110 degrees, dig a hole every 100 feet until you get to the end where a road met then turn around and do the same thing. Ok, I can do this (even though I've never done this before). I held out my compass, got the heading and walked 110° and dug a hole every 30 meters. After a couples hours, I realize that I have not crossed the road like I was supposed to, I have not heard from Inna, and oh by the way, I have no idea where I was. Stupid compass!, I thought, now I am lost. It take much to convince myself that I have been wrong all along and this whole compass heading is the very reason I'm in trouble in the first place. So I turn in another direction, convinced this was the right

way all along, and I start walking and dutiful dig every a hole every 30 meters. More time goes by, lots more holes are dug and I am starting to panic as I walk into a really dense part of the tract of property. No matter what, the holes still have to be dug; the property has to be surveyed. As move along my self-conceived heading, I duck down to get under the bushes and then I'm crawling and the woods get thicker and thicker until I am totally stuck under the largest thicket of thorns I have ever seen. At this point I am crawling on my belly spec ops style, I'm dragging my face through the dirt because my hair was getting caught in the thorns, and I am as lost as I can get. This is my first day of work as an archaeologist... what am I supposed to do? I do the only thing left, I call out to Inna, help! After a little while she comes around the corner and says, "There you are! I've been looking all over for you." She hacks away at the thicket with her shovel and gets me out. "What happened?" All I could say, "I got confused and I didn't think the compass was right and I got just lost."

Her words to me, "Trust your compass, it's never wrong" have become a metaphor for my faith. We have a compass, a covenant written on our hearts by God that if we just trust it will guide through many of our moments in life, particularly the ones where we are ensnared by thickets of chaos and turmoil. Our nation and world are entangled in a web of turmoil and violence and I think back to my first day of work. If I pulled out my trusty compass, where would the heading be today? And do I trust our compass at all costs? As where will our compass heading lead us if we follow it?

In light of recent events, I like many others am upset and angry. There are moments when I feel powerless and hamstrung by how incredibly overwhelming the reasons for the violence and the cacophony of voices that are a part of it all. We are entangled in a thicket as tall as the tree canopy itself and we feel the pain of the thorns digging in, some more than others- black lives matter, we are the 99% movement, ISIS inspired attacks, the LGBTQ community and friends, gender pay inequality, and on and

on it goes. The world is crying out. We are hurting as a people. We don't understand one another. While the cries come from all corners of the world, if we are to think specifically about America we are blessed in that we are so diverse as a nation. From people of hundreds of ethnicities, hundreds of languages, ages, races, experiences, we are incredibly diverse. But it takes intentionality on all of our parts to understand one another. It's a gift but it's going to take work to realize our giftedness. But how? And most importantly, where is God in all of this?

Romans chapter 12 is a helpful place to begin and very real compass heading in times of trouble. "Let love be genuine, hold fast to the good, rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, do repay anyone evil for evil but take thought to what is noble."¹ These words are not written in a vacuum or a white room of ease but are crafted by Paul who endured an incredible amount of persecution for following Christ. These are words that echo Jesus' great Sermon on the Mount. The book of Romans was written late in Paul's ministry. He writes knowing that his days are coming to an end and he works to carefully to craft the word of God. More than crafting a beautiful message, he seeks to encourage the people of his day to remain faithful and true, to follow the compass of Christ even when their bodies hurt, when their souls ache, when the powers and principalities threatened their lives, and when they were shamed and rejected by those who are supposed to love them. This is a way of response when we are faced with fear. It's what Walter Wink calls "the third way." It's a re-imagination of response to violence and suffering in our world. But to really understand the third way, it's helpful to know the first two ways. When animals, humans included, are faced with the fear they usually respond in two ways: fight or flight. Humans naturally respond in those two ways too. Simply said, when the fight response kicks in, we dig our metaphorical heels in the ground and fight. We have

¹ Romans 12: 9, 14, 17.

certainly seen this response in the political campaigns waged today, through terrorism attacks, and recent attacks on the police and conversely in police brutality viewed through you tube and police vehicle cameras. In a more localized way, I have seen parents attack teachers verbally and personally had physical threats against church members. Social media has opened a very high speed road for the masses post angry rants without any real human discourse or accountability. The message is this, “when you are threatened, stand and fight. Don’t be bullied but eliminate the threat at all costs.”

The second response is the flight response and frankly, it’s my preferred method of response. We way many live into this response is by sticking our heads in the sand and pretending that nothing is actually going on. If we flee mentally and physically from our problems, the thought is that they may just go away. If we pretend the discord is some distant far off land or just shut our eyes, hearts and minds to what’s happening then it’s not real.

But there’s a third way and we have several witnesses to that way. Living into the third way is a way we can oppose injustice and evil in a way that transforms and brings justice to all people. Walter winks articulates it this way, “[The] third way [is] a way that is neither submission nor assault, flight nor fight, a way that can secure your human dignity and begin to change the power equation.”² The best way to visualize the third way is through the practice of jujutsu. Jujutsu is a marital art form that was developed several hundred years ago during a pretty tumultuous time in Japanese history. The word means “the art or technique of gentleness or yielding.”³ The Jujutsu practitioner learns to manipulate the force of their opponent without confronting the opponent with force. In essence rather than using violence to fight violence they learn

² Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 110.

³ Masao Takahashi, “Jujutsu,” Wikipedia, July 13, 2016, assessed July 21, 2016, <https://wikipedia.org/>.

to deflect the force of the violence away from their body where it ultimately wears the opponent out and they become disarmed.

The best witness to the third way is the way of the cross. Although Jesus was tempted to fight or flee by Satan in the wilderness and throughout much of his ministry, he was tempted to fight or flee by his disciples, and even the jeers of the soldiers as he hung on the cross was a temptation to fight or flee. Instead, Jesus walked into the violence of the Roman Empire to transform the entire world. The cross, a historic symbol of persecution particularly for the Jewish people, was a universal symbol of the powers that be and the worst that they could do to human beings. The cross that once signaled silence and death became a sign of hope and new life for millions of people across the world today. Many of us proudly wear the cross on a daily basis as a constantly reminder of hope of new life through Jesus Christ. Now, because Jesus chose the cross, we have a third way and we are no longer restricted to basic animal instincts of flight or flight.

In our modern era, we continue to see great signs of the third way among us. Many still remember the nonviolent protests of Martin Luther King Jr. who believed that the third way of resistance affirmed the dignity of all people, black and white, rich and poor for the transformation of the world. Martin Luther King writes, "Through violence you may murder a hater, but you can't murder hate. Darkness cannot put out darkness. Only light can do that."⁴ Martin Luther King Jr. confronted the injustice of his day but it was through the power of marches, the pen, and word. He named the sin, loved and called those around him to equality of all human beings. While died long before his dream came to fruition, but the vision he proclaimed continues to guide and transform us today.

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 249.

There are so many witnesses throughout our history who give us hope. The early church mothers and fathers, St. Francis of Assisi, Mahatmas Gandhi, Dorothy Day, are all models of the third way that works and is the only way forward. Now you may be saying to yourself, and I too, “but I’m not Martin Luther King, Jr. or Gandhi and I am especially not Jesus Christ! I can’t do that – it’s too difficult.”

Think back to my earlier metaphor of my compass. I got in the most trouble when I convinced myself that I was smarter and more able than what seemed like the inanimate object around my neck. I found myself face down in the dirt and hair entwined in thorns when I convinced myself I was smarter than the magnetic force of the earth. What I learned on my first day was that little metal needle is governed by a much larger force than I could see or control. No matter where I was in the world, that force that I cannot see would still point towards North. We too are lead to a much larger force than ourselves.

When we choose to follow Jesus we are blessed with a promise: Jesus says, “Those who believe in me will do the works that I do and in fact will do greater works than these.”⁵ That promise partners us with the Holy Spirit who gives us abilities that go far beyond our wildest dreams. Do you really believe in his word? Do you believe that you can actually do *greater* works than Jesus Christ? Jesus does and he believes it for all of us now. We are also woven into a story that stretches across the centuries and a whole host of saints who are cheering for us in heaven.

The model of the third way is part of DNA as Christians. We can live into this model as a way forward. So the challenge comes now. What’s the legacy you want to leave behind in this moment? What story do we want our children and grandchildren to tell? Because the choice is ours right now. We can choose angry posts or pitching a fit at a PTA meeting or afflicting violence on our fellow human beings. Or we can

⁵ John 14:12

choose the maturity of seeking understanding and care. We can choose to turn the table of discord to form relationships with those whom we don't understand. We can work to bring down the walls that separate us as people and bring unity and justice for all. We can do this but it's a choice. What's the way you will choose? Trust the compass because the compass never lies.

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