Following the Yellow Brick Road
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Isaiah 61:1-2a; II Cor. 5:16-21; Clip from Wizard of Oz & Poem: The Road Not Taken
Farewell Sermon to Friends at St Paul's UCC, Seattle, WA
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(Show Clip of Dorothy starting her journey to Oz by following the yellow bricked road)

It might seem strange to some of you that I would use this clip from the movie The Wizard of Oz, but actually it is very basic to the relationship that exists between me and St. Paul's! It was 7 yrs ago this summer in 2002 that it was “suggested” to me by the Committee on Ministry that I do a project with a more typical UCC congregation and not with University Cong UCC where I was a member. I chose to come to St. Paul's, mostly because it was the best fit with my circumstances at the time.

I think someone from St. Paul's needs to go back to the Committee on Ministry and explain just who you are and what ministries go on here, because St. Paul's is anything but “Typical”. Nonetheless, it was agreed upon by Pastor Tim and I that my “special project” would be to develop and facilitate the 2002 annual Family Camp that is held at Pilgrim Fir's. The program that I developed was the exploration of some Theological truths that are presented in the story of The Wizard of Oz.

So, 7 yrs ago I started my relationship with you here at St. Paul's with the story of Oz and I thought it seemed logical to revisit a piece of that as I prepare to follow that Yellow Brick Road to Rock Springs, WY. I am sure that all of you know that when a story is developed around the vehicle of a road trip, the theme is that of “self discovery”. This can be seen in movies such as Thelma and Louise; in Trans America; in The Wizard of Oz; and in the current movie of Julie and Julia, which the road trip is done through the use of a cook book instead of traveling to differing locations. In all these stories, the lead characters develop new awareness of some part of themselves that they didn't realize existed deep within. I’m not sure how aware you are of it, but a large portion of both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures contain lessons discovered through the use of road adventures. The story of Abraham and Sarah is told through their travels from the land of Ur toward a new home promised by God. In the New Testament, the majority of the Epistles come from the road trips of the Apostle Paul; Jesus' entire ministry was “on the road” and through those stories, Jesus continually became aware of who he was and gained the direction needed to move toward deepening his relationships with God and his disciples.

I would like to share with you a poem that has it’s origins in walking, written by Robert Frost, titled:

The Road Not Taken
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 marked 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.

Robert Frost

The inspiration for this poem came from Frost's amusement over a familiar mannerism of his closest friend in England, Edward Thomas. While living in England, Frost frequently took long walks with Thomas through the countryside. Repeatedly Thomas would choose a route which might enable him to show his American friend a rare plant or a special vista; but it often happened that before the end of such a walk Thomas would regret the choice he had made and would sigh over what he might have shown Frost if they had only taken a “better” direction. Frost, himself had been reared with the biblical notion that a man, having put his hand to the plow, should not look back. However Frost found something quaintly romantic in sighing over “what might have been”, which after returning to America, he so thoughtfully expressed in this poem.

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.” Life is a journey, a journey that is full of choices. At age 30, I recognized a diverging path in my life, a path that was being presented (I believe) by God. With my decision to go into parish ministry, the divergent path has ultimately led me to St. Paul's.

Parish Ministry for me was not an occupation that one day I woke up and decided I wanted to go into. Rather, it has been a culmination of many things over my life that brought me to seek ordination and the vocation of ministry. Has that journey been a smooth and level walk, not by any stretch of the imagination, but it is the path that I have continued to take, even with what may be viewed by some as having a few detours.

The two bible scriptures that were read today exemplify my calling; my view of what ministry is about. And when I say my view of ministry, I am saying, how up to this point in my life's journey, I have experienced the love of Jesus and interpret what He was trying to say to the church of His day and still speaking to us today; those principles that God would like us to live out, as a community of faith.

In the beginning of the 61st chapter in Isaiah, we read: “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor; He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound. To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” For this was one of the readings that I chose at my ordination celebration. This was the reading that Jesus used when he declared the beginning of His ministry.

In the second letter to the Corinthian church, Paul was stating the basic mission of the church: that of the Ministry of Reconciliation. I chose this particular scripture not only because it under girds my focus of what the church should be about, but because it has been a major focus of the ministries found here at St. Paul's. If we were a Lutheran congregation, we would be labeled a Reconciling in Christ congregation because of our position on human sexuality, meaning there is no sin in being gay, lesbian, bi-sexual or transgendered or heterosexual. As a United Church of Christ congregation we call ourselves Open and Affirming.

Coming back to the clip that I started this sermon off with, for those who have seen the movie
The Wizard of Oz in its entirety, you will remember that the movie portrays Dorothy’s life in Kansas devoid of color. Her world was totally being lived out in black and white. Then her life is totally changed after being transported by a tornado to an unknown land. The Land of Oz. As she opens the door of her house, she walks out of her life of black and white into a world filled with color. The road that she needs to travel isn’t a road that one normally travels, it is not a dirt road, it isn’t a red cobblestone road, it was a yellow brick road. What is being symbolized through the use of color is the road that she is beginning to travel isn’t going to be the ordinary path but one of great wonder.

When St. Paul's officially became an Open and Affirming congregation, it was a statement to the Ballard community that this church was choosing to walk down a different road, a path that takes seriously the teachings of Christ that all people are beautifully and wonderfully made in the sight of God and that ALL are welcome through Christ. St Paul's declared, like Dorothy, you were going to travel the Yellow Brick Road. It is not hollow words being spoken at the beginning of the worship service when we give the opening greeting; that no matter who you are or where you are in life's journey, you are welcome in this community of faith; be you believers, seekers or doubters. You here at St. Paul's truly have the heart of Christ and live this opening greeting.

I was asked if I’d like to preach today, because once again, two roads diverge for me. It is time for me to start walking down a path that I have not taken. I am going to be serving a faith community not as a “settled pastor”, but that of a “Transitional Minister.” A good share of my early ministry with the Rock Springs congregation will be one of reconciliation between its members. By accepting this new assignment, I am no longer going to be able to continue walking with all of those that I have grown to love and care about while living here in Seattle and particularly with you here at St. Paul's.

As in any family, every member is like a piece of thread and each members life becomes inner woven creating this great tapestry that we call “experience”, it is our reality really. Then there comes a time when each person’s thread is moved in a differing direction, creating voids in those experiences. But it also creates opportunities for new threads to be introduced and the creation of another wonderful piece to the overall tapestry. Here at St. Paul's over the last 7 yrs, we have seen many threads enter into this tapestry and many threads have exited, some through the process of dying, some by the process of feeling that they no longer belong at St. Paul's and others through moving away because of new opportunities that are being pursued.

What happens when each person who comes into the life of this faith community is the opportunity to grow and to contribute, as well as receive. The same thing happens when each of us leaves this faith community, we have the opportunity to grow, contribute and receive in the next chapter of our life. As a congregation, you too will have points in your ministry where two roads diverge in a wood and you will need to choose which path to take. It's usually never easy; there is usually a feeling of uncomfortableness and even anxiety with each new path taken. There are things that are lost with each new choice, but there are greater things to receive if we are willing to let go and look ahead.

In Frost's, poem, we can recognize that there can be the mind games that we play when once we've chosen our path, by beginning to play the “what if I took the other road.” With Dorothy, she needed to choose which road would lead her to Oz, so she could get the Great Wizard to help her get back home. I think even with the study of Jesus' life, the story of the resurrection – meaning that life does not end when the human body dies but continues on in a different presence and plane, we can see the true value isn't getting to the chosen destination but rather the true value is in the “journey”. It is in the journey, the traveling down the road that we discover who we are. It is in the journey that we meet new challenges and grow. It is in the journey that we develop relationships. It is in the journey that we learn to live outside of ourselves. So when the scarecrow was telling Dorothy that some people chose to go this direction, while others chose to go that direction and some even go in both directions isn't so far fetched.

Today we stand at a point where two roads diverge: I am choosing a road that will lead me
away from Seattle and to a land of cowboy boots and horses and a new faith community to serve. You will be staying here and thinking you will be continuing down the road you have been traveling. I know that the road tomorrow will be different than the road you are on today. For life is ever moving forward and it is never the same. It is not the destination that matters, but rather the relationships that we create and the lessons we learn along the way. Even though we will not be physically seeing one another as often as we now do, we are for ever woven together as friends, as brothers and sisters because of our relationship in our journey thus far. So this is not “goodbye” but rather “Au Revoir!”