

The Road Less Traveled – October 18, 2019

I left in plenty of time. I really did. It was this past Saturday, and my daughter and the Bearcat Regiment had a marching contest in Birdville ISD. They were due to march at 10:30 a.m., and I left home at 9:15. I ran through Brookshire's to get some gas, and while I was pumping, I pulled up the GPS on my phone and started typing "Birdville." The top listing was "Birdville ISD Stadium," so I clicked on it and got the directions.

Thirty-five minutes later I turned into the Birdville ISD Stadium in Haltom City, only to find the stadium deserted. There were supposed to be 30 or so bands there, plus all their fans, so something was obviously amiss. I quickly pulled up the email the band had sent out, only to find that the contest was to be held at the Birdville Fine Arts/Athletic Complex in North Richland Hills, apparently the newer of Birdville ISD's stadiums. The problem was it was now 10:10 a.m., and my GPS said the other stadium was 20 minutes away.

I set out like the stereotypical road rage driver, laying on my horn and yelling at every driver who did not proceed as soon as the light turned green. I knew that these marching contests run irritatingly on time, so my chances of making it there, running across the parking lot, buying a ticket and making it into the stadium before they closed the tunnel – as they do whenever a band is performing – were slim.

I did make it, though just barely and with at least a few years shaved off my life. While making a mental vow to find a way to get in better shape, I also reflected on a central truth in life. It doesn't matter how good your plans are, if you don't know where you are going, chances are pretty good you aren't going to get there. Or at the very least, it's going to be a struggle.

I think the same can be said about church life. We tend to speak in lofty language when we talk about vision and mission in the church. The United Methodist Church articulates its mission as "Making Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World." Some years back, Aledo UMC expanded on that a bit, sharing as our local church's mission "Making Disciples of Jesus Christ for the Transformation of the World by Knowing, Loving and Serving Our God." A couple of years ago we sought to simplify that with a new vision – "Cultivating a Passion for Christ."

All of those mission statements/visions are fine. They all look good on a bumper sticker or a coffee mug. They are all simple enough for people to memorize and recite. The problem is that too often we don't really know what they mean. In other words, we don't really know where we are going.

What does it really mean to "make disciples"? Does that mean Bible study? Sunday school? Ensuring that we all have a better understanding of the Bible and the basic building blocks of our faith? Or is it something else? What does it mean to transform the world? Is it enough to grow the church, to bring more people to Christ? Or does it mean making the world a

better place for people, regardless of whether they are in the church? Or is it both? Or neither?

What does it mean to cultivate a passion for Christ?

I was reminded of these questions over the weekend when I read the news about the fatal police shooting of a woman in her home by a Fort Worth Police officer. The woman, 28-year-old Atatiana Jefferson, was shot and killed by a Fort Worth officer responding to a welfare check around 2:30 a.m. Saturday. As it turned out, Jefferson was playing video games with her 8-year-old nephew at the time. The officer apparently saw her shadow through the window and fired his weapon, killing her.

The response from the community was immediate and pointed. The officer resigned 48 hours later and soon after was charged with murder. The Jefferson's family, activists and city officials called for an independent investigation of the Fort Worth Police Department's procedures. And on Tuesday, a retired Fort Worth Police officer went on record as saying that, as an African-American woman, she feared being pulled over by Fort Worth Police.

All told, it's hard to know where we are going. It's easy to point the finger at the officer and say he violated various department protocol in the shooting. It's easy to point at Jefferson and say – as was revealed earlier this week – that she may have had a weapon because she heard people creeping around outside. It's easy to call for the swift prosecution of an overzealous officer. It's easy to say that none of us who aren't police officers can possibly understand the judgment calls they have to make in an instant.

But none of that really gets to the bigger picture. The bigger picture is that, across our nation, there is a chasm between law enforcement and minority communities. It's undeniable. And attempts to minimize that chasm as simply the excuses of criminal elements looking for excuses to blame police for their predicament miss the larger point. The reality is that there is an inherent distrust and fear between the two parties. And it is leading to too many innocent people being killed.

We don't where we are going. And until both law enforcement and the communities they serve can sit down together and begin to see the world through each other's eyes, we never will. The tragedies will continue. And when they do it will deepen the chasm between the two. And the distrust will become more pronounced. And we will see more stories like the tragic one this weekend in Fort Worth.

The problem is real. It is not as simple as law and order vs. not. It is not as simple as black vs. white. It is a matter of trust. It is a matter of knowing where we are going. And we are the only ones who can answer that question. Maybe the community of Christ is a good place to start.

See you Sunday.