

TAKING THE ADVENTURE ROAD

Going on vacation with me is often memorable in a number of ways.

One, of course, has to do with the sustained pleasure of my stimulating and charming company. Besides that, however, if one goes with me, one also always has the element of the unpredictable.

That dimension of uncertainty takes a variety of forms. For example, one of the Stoudt Rules of the Road goes as follows: "If it can be helped, never drive the same road twice."

Translation: If you go by one route to get to an attraction, if at all possible, you do not take that same route back again to the main road--you already know what's along there. So, in order to see and experience new things, instead return to the main road and to your continuing itinerary by a different route.

Admittedly, that sometimes takes us a little out of the way and might require a bit more time and effort, but it also affords us the chance to become familiar with a broader section of that particular area where we find ourselves. Over the years, Hue and I have been exposed to some striking country and had some neat chance-encounters that otherwise we would have missed, had we just gone straight out and straight back again to the interstate.

I would argue that a little genuine adventure like that should be part of any good, worthwhile, and memorable trip.

There's an important implication here. Traveling with this rule in mind also affords us the opportunity, on occasion, to discover and to take what I call the "adventure road." I think that it is fair to say that sometimes Hue lives in considerable dread with respect to the "adventure road."

It almost always entails leaving the macadam. It is taking the gravel road that leads off into the canyons or pines to who-knows-where. It is taking the dirt road which appears on the map as the faintest of dash-dash-dashes, but which is the only way to get to the more remote ghost town or the unique Nature-site in question. While all the other tourists are whizzing along on the hard top, the "adventure road" is taking the off-road used only by the locals, and maybe not all that frequently even by them.

In all fairness to Hue, having often gone off on the "adventure road" on our vacations, I must confess that we have, at times, gotten ourselves into a number of tricky situations, which admittedly required more ingenuity and stamina than we would have needed back on the main road. Despite the stress, the rigors, and the demands of these nerve-wracking moments--oh, some of the stories that we could tell!--and despite all the bad thoughts of me that no doubt she was thinking at the time, here we are, alive and well, and talking about it! So, I guess it wasn't really all that bad!

Now, please understand, I'm not counseling mere recklessness, or taking the sorts of needless chances that could conceivably be self-endangerment. Rest assured that in my off-hours, I'm no bungee jumper or sky diver.

However, I am encouraging us to be less rigid in our imagined security. There is such a thing as being too restrained, too cautious, too safe--all of which serves only to keep us terribly constricted, confined, and stuck in old ways, and at the same time terribly resistant to what fresh and novel things God might be attempting with us.

The point is simple: Anyone can negotiate the three lane highway; but it requires a certain amount of courage and faith to turn off intentionally onto the “adventure road.”

Listen again to Jesus’ words from this morning’s readings, pithy thoughts that are most clearly expressed in Matthew’s version, but which are obviously recognizable as well in the Lukan verses. “The gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it” (7.13).

OK. Let us call this approach “taking the interstate”--being cautious and conservative, playing it safe, not taking any real risks, more or less going the well-trodden way everyone else is going.

Stated as such, Jesus’ unsettling guidance is found to be purposefully contrary: Take the hard road; enter by the narrow gate. If you want a deeper life, a richer life, Jesus suggests, seek out the tough-to-find gate, the difficult gate, the troublesome gate, the gate that you might have to stand sideways to slide through, the scary gate, the gate that will no doubt cost you more than you were originally prepared to give. Take that gate. Take the gate that most people never even see and so walk on by it, or who, if they do see it, think that it represents too much work or too much worry or too much sacrifice, and so choose to keep on walking down the well-worn path.

I hear Jesus saying, “For heaven’s sake, get off the turnpike! Find an ‘adventure road!’” You see, what in our more insecure and frightened moments we might regard as being life-threatening oftentimes turns out actually to be life-enhancing.

I would suspect that, if ever there is a time for us in the Church to be flirting with the “adventure road,” it is during an interim period--when the previously tried-and-true is not so reliable or even prudent anymore, when little is for-certain or solid, when multiple new off-roads present themselves as paths for re-imagining and redefining who we are, and for moving on in a new direction with a new look.

The continuing interim journey here stretches out before us, ready and waiting for us to engage the coming months with further boldness and greater stretching. Only 18 months into this experience to this point, we still have a lot of choice in the matter. The character of these pivotal months together is just beginning to be reformed. Who knows what we’ll look like in another year, or two?

Are we just to knock off these weeks, one after another, like so many numb and mindless miles on the interstate, until we suddenly wake up to find ourselves at the final destination of a new hire, having arrived safe and sound, but none the better for the trip?

Or are we to make a different sort of journey, pushing off the main drag, getting lost a few times and finding our way back again, coming to know parts of ourselves, for worse and for better, that we didn’t know before were even there--all the while moving in the direction of new life (which is where God is always at work!), and, in the end, discovering that we are immeasurably better for the more adventurous route we have taken?

“The gate is narrow and the road is hard, that leads to life.” Put differently: If, in fact, our preference is for the wide and for the easy, then we’re not really invested in life. It may be safety or security or ease to which we’re really committed, but it’s not life.

Tragically, says Jesus, where that new life, where that abundant life, is concerned, “there are few who find it.” How sad. How very sad.

But, of those who do desire it, and who do find it, will we of St. John’s be among them?

And will you be one of them?

