

Constructive Disruption
Reading from the Old Testament: Isaiah 58:6-9
Reading from the New Testament: Matthew 4:12-23

If your GPS is consistently recalculating you are either lost, not paying attention, know all the shortcuts, or are too stubborn to yield to authority or reason or cooperation. Or maybe, you just don't like the sound of her voice. If, occasionally, your rebellion leads you to a dead end, so be it. Such is the privilege of freedom. Nobody is going to tell you what to do, a principle advertised by symbols as divergent as a Che Guevara t-shirt or a Don't Tread on Me flag. Willful arrogance mixed with certitude is toxic. Flawed and finite, you are just not wired to always know what is best for you, much less, all others in your life.

Ignoring the map is certainly an option preferred by many, but I have to tell you, your insistence on calling all the shots seldom brings comfort or peace to the people in your life. If you refuse to share the wheel, consider counsel, relinquish control, ask for help, follow instructions, step away from the spotlight, allow for the alternative, or appreciate the leadership skills of your peers, your life with others will be marked by tension, foster distrust, give rise to resentment, and reap a crop of bitterness. Sure, feeling in control is empowering, but know

that control, more often than not is illusory, as your family may remind you after that third wrong turn.

Tara Westover is a best-selling author with a PhD from Cambridge, which is a miracle, not because of any intellectual shortcoming, but because, for most of her life, her gifts were caged by the repressive control of her father, a Mormon separatist who rejected all formal education, traditional medicine, and anything that sniffed of public governance, all the while clutching to a Bible he read in a manner never intended by its writers, and I think it's okay to say, neither as it was intended by the Holy Spirit. With a passion that often crossed over into delusion, he regularly marshalled his children into jobs in his junkyard that were extremely hazardous with no thought to safety. Instead of school, the children separated junk, roofed granaries, and scrapped metal with a lethal scissoring machine that could treat a human like a Cuisinart treats an avocado.

When one son escaped to seek an education, Tara, maybe 11 or 12 at the time, was drafted into the ridiculously perilous methods her father developed to salvage scrap iron. One morning, working alone, she loaded a bin with two thousand pounds of iron. She couldn't operate the

massive forklift to empty the bin into the trailer, so she went to get her father. The forklift was used to raise the bin some 25 ft in the air and then, with the boom extended, tilt the forks so the scrap could slide out, crashing down into the trailer. So, her father's bright idea was for Tara to get in the bin, saying, "We'll get more in if you settle the iron after it's been dumped, Hop in." She says her father jammed the fork under the bin, lifted her and the scrap and headed full throttle toward the trailer, with little concern that his little girl was in the bouncing bin up above with a ton of metal ricocheting around like popcorn in a popper.

A piece of metal slashed into her leg, pinning her in the bin, not letting her scramble out to the top of the trailer before her father tilted the bin, thus dumping the iron and her. She bounced down, first falling eight feet into the wall of the trailer, and then another ten feet until she hit the ground. Bleeding profusely, gashed, bruised and battered, her father simply sent her inside to her mother, and went back to work.

Her dad would justify these tasks, saying, "God and his angels are here, working right beside us. They won't let you get hurt." (Tara Westover, *Educated*) And yet, repeatedly, someone in the family was getting hurt, seriously hurt. When you become so single-minded, determined to do it

your way, see the world only through your eyes, you ignore the fact that others suffer the pain and trauma of your certitude.

The advertisements and non-fiction best sellers challenge you to chase your dreams, claim your truth, forge your path, all depending on the premise that you, and only you, know what is best for you. No doubt, it's an attractive idea, but the premise itself is among the most dangerous ideas, if not the most dangerous and destructive idea to emerge from the earth. In fact, it is the forbidden fruit; the original sin. The serpent said the tasty fruit would allow you to be like God, a temptation to which every human falls prey. It is the source of broken relationships, fractured families, sketchy schemes, horrific injustice, domestic violence, world wars. Very seldom are we completely accurate in saying, "I know what I'm doing."

The GPS isn't always right, but then, neither are you. As Criss Jami observes, "During the flames of controversy, opinions, mass disputes, conflict, and world news, sometimes the most precious, refreshing, peaceful words to hear amidst all the chaos are simply and humbly 'I don't know.'" I don't quite understand why humility seems the more perilous path, as if the word *humility* comes with a warning sign

that says, *Do not try this at home*. However, I do know that when grace collides with humility a world transforming energy is released that has the power to redeem, reconcile, and heal.

Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishermen. For James and John, the path was established at birth. Their father, Zebedee, was a fisherman, and though the text leaves open the question of how many generations the vocation spanned, we can assume they had been around the work of the fishing boat most of their lives, their fingers well-calloused from working with the nets long before a whisker appeared on their chins.

I have a friend whose first in-laws had a family tree gorged with lawyers, judges, and pastors; succeeding generations rarely breaking the branch. In next week's Super Bowl, the coach of the 49ers is the son of a coach and the coach of the Chiefs is the father of a coach. Coaching legend Bill Belichick's daughter is a coach, one son is a coach, and the other is a scouting assistant for the Patriots. I remember a youth whose father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were lawyers. I asked her what career she saw herself pursuing, and immediately without any

trace of doubt she said, “Anything but law.” I read recently that she’ll soon be graduating from law school.

It is often debated whether you choose a vocation, a life, a path or whether a vocation, a life, a path chooses you. However, today our text confronts us with a question that is relevant whether we’re talking about life in general, or vocation, or relationships: In your decision tree, who is at the top?

“17 From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” 18 As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. 19 And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 21 As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.”

The word translated as *repent* has become so convoluted by the *turn or burn* theology of the 20th Century that we lose the substance, the meat of its meaning. Essentially, repentance has to do a change of direction, a course correction, as with a parent nudging the child's trike back toward the center of the sidewalk, as with a good Samaritan seeing the deer in the headlights look on your face. *Are you looking for the restroom? It is back that way on the left.* Similarly, the essence of sin is missing the mark, as with a bad joke when it's labeled off-color.

Sometimes we head down paths that are self-destructive, or hurtful to others, or harmful to the common good. Sometimes we really miss the mark. In that case the censure of *repent* is sharper, i.e. if you're doing something bad, injurious to yourself or others, **stop it!** Repent. But repentance is much more than that. When Jesus says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near," he is basically saying the same thing that he expresses to the four fishermen, "Follow me." It's as if Jesus is saying to all humanity, *I see you. If you're not stuck in a rut, then you are running off in every direction, for what? To what end? Follow me, I will take you to a place called purpose, meaning, reconciliation, restoration. For I actually do know where I'm going.*

That's not turn or burn; that's *turn* and *live*. You could call it a constructive life disruption. For Peter, Andrew, James, and John, in that critical time and that particular place where geography and passion are so intertwined and dynamic and world shaping, that meant leaving the boat. For you and me, *following* the Christ, may lead to a lot of things and in many different directions, but the meaning will remain the same for all. The proverb expresses it this way, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight." The Apostle Paul phrased it this way, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God."

Tara Westover could have acquiesced to the order of her father's bizarre conception of God's kingdom, never leaving the mountain, the junkyard, and the survivalist's preparations for the apocalypse. She could have avoided disrupting what for her family was the norm. That would have been the path of least resistance, but as the scab evolved on her leg, she made a decision and felt compelled to confront her father, telling him she wanted to go to school. His response was predictable. He said, "In this house, we obey the commandments of the Lord ... You

remember Jacob and Esau?” She did, and she says, “He returned to his reading, and I left quietly. I did not need any explanation; I knew what the story meant. It meant that I was not the daughter he had raised, the daughter of faith. I had tried to sell my birthright for a mess of pottage.” (Tara Westover, *Educated*)

Life continued on in the Westover house, but Tara’s decision had taken root, and would not go away. And against all odds, having no resources and so little book knowledge, she would transcend the oppression of that place, she would receive an incredible education. There would be pain, even loss, but in the end, it was a constructive disruption.

She might not use the term, but the journey forward would be a form of repentance, a change of direction, a sense of calling. Reflecting at one point, she says, “Not knowing for certain, but refusing to give way to those who claim certainty, was a privilege I had never allowed myself. My life was narrated for me by others. Their voices were forceful, emphatic, absolute. It had never occurred to me that my voice might be as strong as theirs.”

It is said that the opposite of faith is not doubt, but certitude.

When you must have things your way, you may well miss the way to life. When Jesus says, follow me, he's not asking us to abandon anything but our notions of self-mastery, our illusions of our own genius, the lie that we are always right, our ignorance of the way our stubborn obsession to control may bring harm to others and calamity to our communities. When Jesus says, follow me, he is in a way saying, *I see that some of you are trapped while others seem lost, and others are somewhere in between. Come with me, I know a better way.* Amen.