

## *Guidance Counselor*

Exodus 33: 12-20    John 16: 5-15

I think one of the most difficult jobs has to be guidance counselor, like in a school setting. The caseload is overwhelming, the range of responsibilities is staggering, and the consequences can be life-shaping, for better or for worse. You not only have the successful kids to guide along their path, you also have the unsuccessful and unprepared ones, the unmotivated ones, the ones who can't see past the next hour because their home lives are such a chaotic mess. It's the guidance counselor who has to help them sort through their choices and plot a path forward to a realistic goal that will enable that youth to become a success ... somehow.

Of course, it isn't simply in school when we need guidance and counsel to make our way forward. In the movie [\*Alice in Wonderland\*](#), she comes to a fork in the road and cannot decide which way to go. Mired in indecision, she then encounters the Cheshire Cat. She explains her predicament, she doesn't know which way to go. The cat grins and says, "That depends ...." On what, she replies. "On your destination. Where are you going?" Alice admits, "I don't know." The cat says, "Then it doesn't matter." Of course, the cat knows better than its own counsel, and starts offering confusing options, quite unhelpfully.

We know very well that it does matter. Even Alice knew that. We can end up at that same junction of seemingly blind options and know that we have to make some kind of decision and hope for the best. We may even discover some Cheshire Cat-like characters offering us confusion and irrelevancy to their own delight and our detriment.

Yet it's more than a guide that's needed. Guides can provide you with directions, or can lead you to your destination, likely making provision for expected circumstances along the way as well. No one tries to climb Mount Everest without guides, people who know the different routes and what to expect on each one, and whose experience enables them to act when conditions suddenly change or other obstacles appear.

It's more than a counselor. In pastoral counseling, we're taught to listen and reflect back to someone what you've heard them say. That helps people to understand how they're handling a situation and hear what may be motivating them, etc. I'm not very good at it, but nevertheless counseling is not supposed to be directive or prescriptive, barely even suggestive.

But putting the two words together – guidance counselor – we hear someone who is listening and then sharing insights with a shared hope with the other of helping them to progress on their way toward a goal and to achievement.

Our need for such support is matched by what we hear in our scripture passages. Picking up with Moses, we resume roughly where we left off last week when Aaron helped God's people create the golden calf for their worship which unsurprisingly didn't sit well with God. Moses keeps getting caught in the middle between the God from

whom he is receiving instructions and support, and the Israelites who seem to test God's patience at every turn. Moses is caught in a classic triangulation which is when a third party gets manipulated by two other parties who have competing agendas, conflict, or issues. Each side uses the third party to convey messages to the other. God tells Moses to speak to the Israelites, and the Israelites complain to Moses about God. No matter how you slice it, Moses is stuck in the middle. The standard method of defusing a triangulation is to stop participating in the contest of wills between the other two parties. But Moses can't. God is God, and God is only speaking to Moses. God will not speak to the Israelites because that's Moses' job. The poor guy can't escape; he simply has to deal with it.

After this last nonsense with Aaron and the golden calf, God has decided that it's necessary to leave the Israelites and get away from them, or God is going to snap altogether and wipe them out. That isn't a very comforting thought, God snapping and all.

For his part, Moses is pretty tired of his role in this, too. In today's passage, we have a revealing back and forth between God and Moses. Moses initiates the discussion with a series of questions which seem to harbor Moses' complaints implicitly:

*You've been telling me, 'Lead these people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have found favor with me.' Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and continue to find favor in your sight. Remember, too, that this nation is your people.*

'You keep telling me to lead this people and you see what a mess they are. If you're backing out, okay, but then who is going to be sent? Clearly I need help. And since you know me by name and would bless me, why are you leaving me up the creek and abandoning me? Thanks a lot! If you would bless me, then do so – show me what I need to do so that I can remain on your good side. One last thing: these are *your* people, don't forget. It's too late to back out now without losing face altogether.'

God is impressed with Moses' arguments. What is translated as, "My Presence will go with you," is literally, "My face will go with you."

But Moses is not satisfied, it seems. He replies,

*If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from every people on the face of the earth?*

Moses seems to reject God's hedging, that God will send his face, as if that's less than the full package. Don't bother if you're not going with us. Your claim of blessing for me and for your people won't be evident. And we will be just like any other people, undistinguished without you.

God finally relents. *I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.*

Despite this success, Moses isn't ready to call it a day yet and presses on, now asking, "Show me your glory." Nice try. And you wonder what Moses still needs from God, but apparently their meeting and God's presence isn't enough. Moses seems to insist on a show of some sort in order to seal God's pledge. God isn't too thrilled with this.

*I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, "The Lord"; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.*

God is going to give Moses some of what he requests, but God also makes it clear that God is not submitting to Moses' request and that this is it. *I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy*, re-asserts God's sovereignty, that God refuses to be ordered around, required to submit to anyone's command. God is graciously going to do what God intends to do, nothing more. So, God will give Moses a sense of what he wants, but not all of what he wants.

The whole issue was whether Moses and God's people would continue to enjoy God's being there in their ongoing trials in the wilderness and into the Promised Land. Moses makes no pre-condition, that this people will be obedient and faithful and righteous. They won't, and both God and Moses know that. God ultimately accepts Moses demand that God be fully present for his people.

It is a powerful statement. Coming after the worst, most reprehensible actions by God's people, God commits to staying with them. Their Guidance Counselor will continue their journey with them. God's people are not abandoned in their time of greatest need, no matter how sinful they've been.

God's people need the assurance that in their time of need, God will be there for them. That's evident in how Moses worked with God to gain, or re-gain, God's favor and blessing. God will go with you. God does not abandon his people, his sinful people.

Jesus in his final speech to the disciples in John's gospel on the night of his arrest also provides assurance for God's people. Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit, rendered in John as "the Counselor." The Holy Spirit will continue the work of righteousness among them, and confront sinfulness and condemn evil in the world. Jesus says, *When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.*

While it is not Jesus himself, the Holy Spirit bears the full and complete presence and counsel of the Lord for his disciples. The Holy Spirit will address what is sacred and

true, revealing goodness and evil, teaching and guiding the disciples, being their Guidance Counselor.

This is another clear case of God's people being in a moment of great need, on the eve of the arrest and execution of their sacred leader. The Lord does not abandon them, but reveals the promise of ongoing counsel and support as this body of God's people seeks to become the body of the living Christ in the world.

The other important point is that the Lord is not required to do this, but out of love and grace desires to work with his people for their success, achievement, and benefit. The Lord knows that his disciples will be stronger, more capable, and more successful in the work of the Kingdom and the ministry of Jesus when they are led, guided, and supported by the Holy Spirit. God wants his people to succeed and blesses them.

God promised to go forth with Moses, even at a time when God was ready first to wipe out the sinful people, and then to abandon them and give up on the project. God stood fast with them. Jesus did the same just before he was arrested, promising his ongoing presence in the Holy Spirit.

God does want his people to achieve, to succeed, and to be blessed. We can rest assured and know that the Holy Spirit is with us in all of our times, good and bad. When the way forward seems blocked, looks grim, and leaves us confused and clueless about which way to go, we should also realize that God's people have been at such crossroads many times before. We're promised our Guidance Counselor who offers us a season of greater clarity and enables us to better sort things out, and who comes with us regardless of our choice, ever seeking to lead us to God's promise and fulfillment. Let us be mindful of this blessing and thankful for our faithful God.