

## Serious Business

“...Today I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life...”  
Deuteronomy 30:19

One snowy night a decade ago, a large group of rowdy teenagers broke into an empty summer house near Middlebury College in Vermont. They had a drinking party and trashed the place. They broke a chair and burned it in the fireplace, discharged fire extinguishers, smashed china, and ruined the rug. The damage came to more than \$10K.

The offenders were caught, and then things got interesting. Since the house had belonged to American poet Robert Frost, the kids were sentenced to... poetry. *The New York Times* reported that Jay Parini was called on by the criminal justice system to administer poetic justice. Parini is a Robert Frost biographer and literature professor. He had been writing a book, *Why Poetry Matters*; thus, his assignment was to put his thesis to the test. His task was to use poetry both to punish and rehabilitate the kids.

One of Parini’s lessons had to do with the poem *The Road Not Taken*, which begins, “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry I could not travel both and be one traveler, long I stood and looked down the one as far as I could to where it bent in the undergrowth; Then took the other...” a poem that ends with, “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.”

*The Road Not Taken* helped the young offenders begin thinking about the choices they had made in their lives, and where these choices were taking them. Then Parini gave them Frost’s poem, *Out, Out*, about a boy who had been cutting firewood with a buzz saw near the family home one afternoon. His sister came out to call him to supper, and, at that point, somehow the saw got away from the boy and cut off his hand. A doctor was summoned, the boy given ether, but as “they listened to his heart. Little – less – nothing! And that ended it.”

The boy in the poem died, and the juvenile offenders in Parini’s class were visibly shaken. This poem was a wakeup call in that what they chose to do with their lives, and how they chose to do it, carried life and death consequences.

I am not picky about how or where a person learns truths about this life, but the church is definitely in the business of teaching such truths. Sometimes we in the church forget how serious is our mission. Certainly many outside the church think that the church doesn’t do anything consequential. Still, it was Moses who says above, “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life...”, and then Jesus who says much more.

– DJ

