

God Moves... Down the Road

March 31, 2019

Scripture: Luke 15: 1-3 and 11b-32

¹ Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³ So he told them this parable: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So, he divided his property between them. ¹³ A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴ When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶ He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷ But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.'" ²⁰ So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹ Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

25 "Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. 27 He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.' 28 Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!' 31 Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"



During the season of Lent we have been working through a series called "God Moves..." that speaks first of how God moves in our lives – calling us to look

within, to search the condition of our souls, and to seek to draw closer to God. In the series, each week we have also been looking at how God calls us to move out into the world. Two weeks ago, I spoke of how God calls us past the obstacles. We first must look within to see our obstacles and to wrestle within with these barriers in our relationship with God. Second, we must seek to help others struggling with obstacles in their life, sharing our faith and experiences as a means to help them with their obstacles. This morning we look at how "God Moves... Down the Road". In order to connect the message on obstacles with

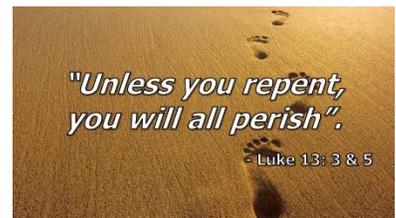
last week's scripture and on into this weeks' scripture and message, I want to share a few words about how God calls us to move "over the fence".



To quickly review, the first five verses from Luke 13 dealt with two tragedies that befall some innocent victims. A group of people were slaughtered by Herod and another group of people were killed in a tower collapse. The general message that Jesus was trying to convey is that tragedies happen to all people – sinners and non-sinners alike. God does not single out just the sinners. Good, Christian people get cancer. Non-Christians do too. This very day the current flooding affects all people – not just certain ones. The faith message here in the opening verses is that we need to always be prepared. When

Jesus says twice, *"unless you repent, you will all perish"*

He is saying that we must always be looking within, always searching our own hearts, always making sure

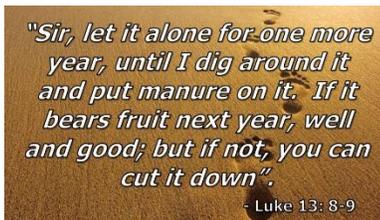


things are good with God on our side of the fence, figuratively speaking. When we find sin in our lives, we are called to repent, lest we perish. We first need to look within to make sure things are in good order in our faith lives before we begin to look across the fence at others' lives.

The second half of the passage dealt with the parable of the fig tree. If you remember, the tree was not producing any fruit. For three years the owner of the vineyard came and looked for fruit. He did not find any fruit. After just three years, he instructed the gardener to cut down the tree. In our faith, we are called to bear fruit. Through the grace of God, we are able to bear "fruit" in

our lives. We are called above all else to love God and neighbor and, in doing so, we bear fruit by serving others, by sharing the good news, by using our gifts and talents to build the kingdom of God, by bringing others to Christ, and by helping people grow deep in Christ. When we are honest and spend some time during Lent in personal reflection and in introspection, we sometimes see that we are failing to bear fruit for God's glory.

In verses 8 and 9 we hear the gardener's plea. He says to the vineyard owner,



"Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down".
- Luke 13: 8-9

"Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down". He is asking

the owner to have patience. Plainly put, God is the owner, we are the tree, and the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ is the gardener. I cannot speak for you, but I am glad that God does not simply cut me off and toss me into the fire when I have not produced fruit for the kingdom. I am grateful that Jesus says, be patient, let my Spirit work within John, teaching and guiding John to be more fruitful, to grow closer and closer to me. This parable is primarily about looking within, about seeking to bear fruit in our lives. But there is also an "over the fence" application here too.



Our call to Christian discipleship beckons us to look over the fence – to look out into the world – to see who we know that needs to know the love of Jesus Christ and to step to their side of the fence, no matter what the grass looks like on that side of the fence, to offer the love of Christ to them. As I spoke about two

weeks ago, depending on the obstacles that another may be struggling with, sometimes that grass might look a little brown when viewed through our eyes. The warning here is that we must not judge the condition of another, but rather, through the grace of God, simply offer the love of God to the other. In doing so we bear fruit for the kingdom of God.



Today's parable is probably a very familiar story for many of us. The younger son chafes under the love of his father because it is a love that he feels constrains him, limits him, denies him the happiness that he thinks he deserves. He rebels and asks for his share of the inheritance. And off he goes to a foreign land. The older brother remains and continues to work for his father. But he too has his own inner struggles. And the father? He loves them both unconditionally. It does not matter what one son did or what one son did not do. He simply loves them unconditionally. This is an example of the unconditional love that God has for each of us.

In our passage today, there are three main characters. At times in our lives, we can relate to all of them. First, the younger son. He felt no obligation to the father or to the family, yet he felt comfortable claiming the privilege of sharing in his father's estate. He wants out from under the yoke of his father. He wants his liberty and the money to enjoy it. He thinks this will bring him the freedom that he desires. In him I am reminded of when I went off to college. I thought I was finally free. I could come and go when and where I wanted. I could eat or drink what I wanted. Like the younger son, I too came to a place where I

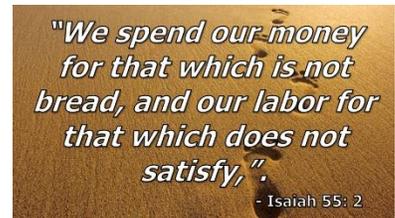
realized that my worldview was not exactly right. The younger son spends all his money and then a famine strikes the land. The prodigal son soon realizes that the pigs have it better than him. He is sorry for his decisions and decides to return to his father, to ask for forgiveness, and to beg to be taken in as a servant. The younger son knows that he is no longer worthy of being a son. He realizes that he has sinned against both his father and against his God.

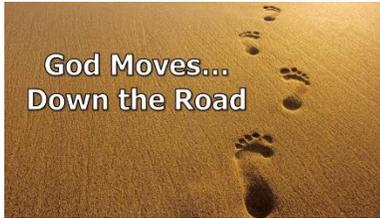
The older brother has remained on the family land. He has continued to work day after day for his father. He has been obedient. Webster's dictionary defines 'obedient' as "*submissive to the restraint or command of authority*". The older son has remained on the estate, working because that is what he is supposed to do. He is following the rules, following the lead of his father, the authority figure. He is behaving this way because he feels that he has to, not because he wants to. He is really playing the role of servant, not of son. I can relate to this role also. There have been many times when I have done something because I was supposed to or because it was expected. The difference between working for his father out of love versus working out of obedience will be revealed when the younger son returns.

Lastly, we have the father. He loves his two sons equally. One is not the favorite. In the beginning of the parable, all he owns belongs to his two sons. After a long life of laboring alongside his two boys, he will pass away, and his inheritance will go to his sons. But then one son comes and asks for his share now. In the culture of the day, the younger son says that his dad is good as dead now. In spite of this rejection and the hurt that must have accompanied it,

the father gives his son his share. We read of no hesitation on the father's part. Our text simply says, *"So, he divided his property between them"*. He loves his son and will honor the request even though it is against the norm, against the way things are done. Then the father goes back to work. Each day he arises and works alongside the older son, continuing as they had before, just one son short. But we do get the impression that he longs for his son. We do not know if he sits on the front porch in the evenings looking for his son to come down the road. But we do know that he saw him when a long way off.

The younger son came to a realization that we all come to at points in our lives. In Isaiah 55:2, we read about those times when *"We spend our money for that which is not bread, and our labor for that which does not satisfy"*. We chase after the things of this world. When our lives are centered on ourselves, then we are not living to our full potential. We are not living as God desires us to live. For the younger son, he chased after the things of the world. He took the money and ran off down the road. He turned from the goodness of both his earthly father and his heavenly Father. He was willing to gamble a sure future for a little fun. We too go down that road at times, willing to gamble a future fortune that is already ours. When we do live away and then come to this same realization, that we have been off in a "foreign land", living far away from God, we need to follow the example of the younger son. We need to repent, to return to walking as God intends, to return back to our Father.

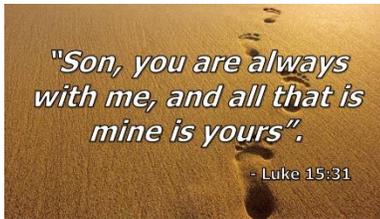




At times we find ourselves in the role of the father. We have had children rebel against us. We have had workers or co-workers or friends that chafe at our beliefs or practices or at a host of many other things.

They have walked away, they have severed ties. Like the father in our parable, we must be gracious and loving in how we treat them. Like the father, we must be gracious as we watch them walk away or somehow else distance themselves. We must then wait graciously. Like the father, we must wait graciously, hoping and praying for a restoration of the relationship, of faith, of whatever was lost. And lastly, if by the work and will of God, they do return, may we be like the father – may we see them making their way back and may we run to welcome them. May we throw a party and celebrate that they have returned to God our Father. In the parable, may we be like the father who loved his son more than his dignity or his pride or anything else. Whether it be a son or daughter, a friend or a coworker, a neighbor or a brother or sister in Christ, above all else, may we extend love and grace and welcome them back from the road with open arms.

And then we have the older son. We sometimes play this role as well. We have been obedient and have been walking as best we can. He feels as if his efforts have not even been noticed. Not once did he even receive a goat to have a party with his friends. He stands outside the party and is angry. The older son has a struggle with extending grace to the one who went astray. He has been a servant to his father and not a son. He has worked for his father. He has not lived in the love and grace of his own father. He has become self-righteous and judgmental. And even to him, the father extends grace.



His father says to him, *"Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours"*. He calls him 'son'. He reminds him that all the he has will be his one day. We are left hanging. Like last week, when we did not find

out if the fig tree bore fruit or not, we do not know if the older son also comes to his senses, repents, and joins the party. With the fig tree, we hope it bore fruit. With the older son, we hope he went in.

Like the fig tree and like the older son, we too are not without hope. Yes, some time may pass before we bear fruit or before we choose to step into God's love. But let us not wait too long. When we find ourselves in the position of the youngest son, when temptation to wild living wins the day, may we realize that we are astray, and may we bow before the Lord our God in humble repentance. When we feel like the older son, when we are doing our duty for the wrong reasons and have become hard of heart, may we also humble ourselves and offer grace to the one who we thought a boss and not a friend or brother or sister in Christ. When we are like the father, when we have received a difficult request or when we have been cast aside for the things of this world, may we wait longingly for the one who has wronged us, patiently waiting for them to repent and to return. Like the father, may we not bear a grudge or withhold mercy or grace, but instead lovingly welcome the lost one home.



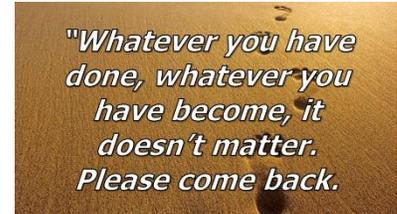
To illustrate the many messages of today's scripture in a slightly different way, to share another way to see or understand how God moves down the road, a story that was first shared by Max Lucado...

There was a girl named Christina. She lives in a small dusty village in Brazil. She's bored. She feels like her strict parents have cheated her out of the joys of life. She longs for the excitement of the big city of Rio. One morning her mother Maria finds Christina's bed empty. Maria knew immediately where her daughter had gone. So, she quickly throws some clothes in a bag, gathers up all her money, and heads for the bus station.

On her way, the mom enters one of those photograph booths in a local drug store and takes pictures of herself. She puts the pictures in her purse and takes the next bus to Rio de Janeiro. She puts up pictures of herself all over town. But she can't find her daughter. The weary mother gets back on the bus and weeps all the way home.

Months later, Christina slowly walks down the hotel stairs. She's already worn down by life. Her young face is tired. Her brown eyes no longer dance with youth but speak of pain and fear. A thousand times over she longed to go back home. She remembered the warm secure feeling of love and acceptance she had experience back with her mum in their little village. But she thought it was too late to turn back.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, her eyes notice a familiar face. She looked again, and there on the lobby mirror was a small picture of her mother. Christina's eyes burned, and her throat tightened as she walked across the room and removed the small photo. Written on the back were these words: "Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come home." And she did.



Christine's mom pulled out all the stops to get her child to come back home, and this is exactly what God does for His children – for you and for me and for everyone else who is lost or broken or has wandered off down the road. It is not His will for anyone here in this room or for anyone out there in the wider world to perish. God says to each of us what this mother said to her daughter: *"Whatever you have done, whatever you have become, it doesn't matter. Please come back"*. If you feel separated from God, if you feel lost, if you are broken, this invitation is for you too. In James 4:8 we read, "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you". Even if we squander God's extravagant gift He will still run to us, again and again, over and over. Thanks be to God. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) When have you experienced a father who loved you more than his dignity or anything else that we would consider valuable?
- 2) Why do we sometimes 'gamble' secure future with God for the things of this world? Pray for strength when temptation comes?
- 3) To whom or to what group of people is God calling you to show a love that is as extravagant as the love the father showed the prodigal son?