

Sermon – “Keeping Our Bearings”

Scripture Readings – Romans 7:15-25a, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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Our first scripture reading is Romans 7:15-25. The conflict Paul described is a fundamental human conflict between willing and doing. Despite every good intention, every healthy resolution, every excellent desire, human beings find they do not follow through on these well intentioned plans. Paul has in view here the religious person, the respectable member of the community, the contributing member of society and what is the remedy for this problem if not more human resolve to do good and more human will. God has acted in Jesus Christ to free humanity from the power of sin. Hear now God's Holy Word.

15 I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. 17 But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

It's easy for us to assume that Jesus, the very Son of God, in his great wisdom and understanding, would never get perturbed with people. Our gospel reading this morning not only indicates otherwise, but reveals how Jesus copes with difficult circumstances and people. Listen for the Word of God in Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30.

16 "But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 17 "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." 18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"; 19 the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds." 25 At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; 26 yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. 27 All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. 28 "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn

*from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30
For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

The title of the sermon: Keeping Our Bearings

Let us pray: Gracious God, as words have been read and I utter words of this message, may your spirit brood upon our hearts so that we may discern your word and your will for each one of us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Some of you may know that immediately after I retired in 2009, Judy and I set out for Oregon with our camper and my bicycle, beginning a 62 day odyssey (spread over 2 summers) that would take from the Pacific Ocean, over the Rocky mountains (actually some 21 passes), and onto the Virginia and the Atlantic Ocean. We had purchased detailed maps of bicycle-friendly roads for the entire trip, that was pretty good, helping to keep our bearings and not losing touch with each other.

But one of the more humorous examples (in retrospect) was when I came into a small town, late afternoon and met Judy at a park where we would camp for the night. Judy was driving a truck with a camper pulled behind and we were wondering if we could park it on the city street when a man came up to us. He asked if we intended to stay and camp for the night. We said, 'yes' if it was OK. He said he was responsible for the parks, and thought there would be no problem, but he would do some checks and get back to us.

In a very short time he returned, all smiles, and announced not only was he in charge of parks – he was a volunteer fireman. They had just completed building a new 2-story facility for the firemen who wanted to stay overnight or clean up after a fire. We could pull our trailer over there and have 24 hour shower facilities and he would run an electric cord out for us – no charge! This was great! But you have to understand my literal map reading skills to appreciate what followed.

The park was on the road into town, and then (on a certain street) I was supposed to turn left and head out. The fire station just so happened to be on that street... After the turn I was supposed to make in the morning. When I got up and took off at 6:00 a.m. (as was my custom) I discovered 'this is the street I was looking for' and proceeded to make my left turn and headed out of town.

About a half hour later, at dawn, I had the disconcerting realization that the sun (which usually rose in the east) was BEHIND me... AND I WAS HEADING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION! (I even spoke to a pickup driver, asking where my next town was, and he confirmed, it was on the other side of the town I had just left. After regaining my bearings and peddling back to where I had started, I called Judy to confess I had just wasted an hour.

The subject of this message has more to do with our moral and spiritual 'bearings'. In times like these, if we are under personal pressures, or when we feel the stress of the

economy, or if we are disturbed by the dysfunction of government. In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus is feeling pressure. How did Jesus keep his moral and spiritual bearings under stress? Our lesson describes three things Jesus practiced, and so can we!

The first thing we see Jesus doing is hearing and acknowledging his detractors. Jesus was not oblivious to criticisms of him or John, and he was able to verbalize where his detractors were coming from. Eugene Peterson's 'THE MESSAGE' paraphrases Jesus: "How can I account for this generation? The people have been like spoiled children, whining to their parents, 'We want to skip rope, and you were always too tired', 'we wanted to talk, but you were always too busy.' John came fasting and they called him crazy. I came feasting, and they called me a lush, a friend of the riffraff."

Many disagreements are based on misunderstanding what another person is trying to say to us. Am I alone admitting I don't always hear correctly, what another person is trying to tell me? Repeating back what I think Judy has just told me can clear up a lot of misunderstanding (before I do something stupid). But sometimes the other person does mean what we don't want to hear... and it is still important to acknowledge it and deal with it. Not many of us sincerely welcome unsolicited advice and criticism, but most of us could learn from it... if we get over ourselves and listen.

Last year one of the Toronto Blue Jays players named Val Batista was about to be sent back down to the minors, because his batting just did not measure up to his potential. It looked like his batting 'mechanics' were OK, but he just didn't make good contact against good, major league pitching. A number of well-meaning people persuaded him to try various things, but all the well-meaning advice just made him more self-conscious, and were beginning to affect the great swing that he had. Finally (as a last resort) his own batting coach prevailed on him to try to anticipate the pitch a split second sooner. He might guess wrong and strike out more often, but when he was right, he might get more solid hits... Val gave the advice an honest try, and at first he looked worse, swinging at pitches that were out of the strike zone. But he persisted, and after a while he began to notice little cues that tipped him off to coming pitches. The hits started coming in bunches, and his abysmal hitting soared to the top of the league! Like the driver who ignores the warning sign "Deep Water Ahead" or "Bridge is Out"...we ignore warnings and criticism at our peril.

Second, notice how Jesus next responds (having acknowledged the criticism) – He prays. Can you think of some times when you might have fared better if you had paused to pray before responding to something you did not like?

On this Sunday close following the 4th of July you might appreciate this story from our nation's formative times. After the war with England was won, there was uncertainty about what course to take (they were only sure they did not want another monarchy.) They tried a loose confederacy, but that system soon broke down so they convened another Constitutional Convention in 1787. This convention was at an impasse on the issue of representation:

-should larger states have more delegates in congress, or

-should smaller states have the same representation as the larger ones.

About when they had 'lost their bearings' (and debate was becoming personal and acrimonious), 81 year old Benjamin Franklin asked permission to make a suggestion: The assembly hushed while he made his way to the podium. His words: "Gentlemen, I have lived a long time and am convinced that God governs in the affairs of men. If a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid? I move that prayer imploring the assistance of Heaven be held every morning before we proceed to business." The motion carried without debate.

The change after prayer was introduced was so dramatic that in a short while the compromise was reached that is still in place today:

- all states have equal representation in the Senate, but
- the House of Representatives has proportionate representation.

If Jesus and our government pray before making decisions, should we not pray before reading or making decisions?

Finally, Jesus offers an invitation to his disciples who feel stressed out: "Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." During times [like the present] when things seem to be breaking down, and changes we do not like, are forced upon us, it's easy to dwell on past victories and successes (resisting and never getting around to needed adjustments).

In the movie, Hoosiers, Gene Hackman plays basketball coach, Norman Dale who came to tiny Hickory High in 1954 to teach history and coach the Huskers. He was an outsider who brought a different coaching style than they were used to, and he wanted the team to learn defense and discipline as well as offense. Right away, he rubs some of the locals the wrong way with his changes, (and people wonder why a coach in his 40's would come to a small town like Hickory.) What they do not know is that Coach Dale had an outstanding record with previous teams. He knew basketball and even coached at the college level, leading a team to a NCAA championship. But he made a mistake. He had physically assaulted one of his players. He was banned by the NCAA and the New York H.S. State Athletic Association, so he sought work in obscurity in IN. And now a special school board meeting was being called to fire him because his basketball philosophy was different, and he had failed to convince their best player, Jimmy Chitwood, (who had decided to give up basketball) to come back and play.

The meeting was called to order and the motion to dismiss him was on the floor, but before a vote could be taken, Jimmy walked in and announced he will start playing again. The whole room erupts with applause, but then Jimmy lays down his conditions: "I play – coach stays. He goes, I go." The motion to dismiss the coach is withdrawn, and he started to build a winning team. In fact they go on to win the IN state championship, beating much larger schools along the way. In the process the coach saves his career, the town rebuilds its self-image, and Jimmy has an opportunity to go to college on an athletic scholarship. All of this happened even though the town didn't recognize the

greatness of their coach at first. At first, they had no faith in him at all. But, when they gave him a chance, they could see his ability... and all their lives were changed.

When life is uncertain and critics challenge us, it's hard to keep our moral and spiritual bearings. But we can do 3 things:

- 1) We need to listen to, and acknowledge voices we may not agree with, because they may offer the warnings or advice we need.
- 2) If even Jesus paused to pray, maybe we should pray more often, especially when we feel stressed.
- 3) And if we truly trust God, and we've done all we can, there comes a time when we should surrender our burdens over to God.

A friend and colleague in ministry confessed, "The one time he heard God's instruction to him most clearly, was when he prayed, 'God, when are you going to help me?!' The resounding answer, "As soon as you let me."

Amen.