Sermon for Sunday, September 17, 2017

Sermon Texts: Genesis 2: 4-7

**Matthew 10: 14-15; 18: 21-22**

Luke 6: 29

Acts 13: 51

## Sermon Title: "Dust to Dust - When Enough is Enough” or

“When Enough is Enough: Shaking the Dust from our Shoes”

Sermon Topic: Shaking the dust from our shoes, and moving on

Sermon Purpose: To teach that there comes a time when we have to move on in our ministry and mission, admitting our failure to have the message heard by a certain group or town, and caring more for the good of the message than for the listener(s).

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*Sermon Prayer: God of love and hope, guide us with Your Holy Spirit as we study the message of our Lord and Christ and strive to apply it to our lives on this earth. Make us, in Your graciousness, messengers of peace and witnesses of power. In Jesus’ precious name we pray. Amen.*

Our nation was founded on the principle of freedom from tyranny, freedom to grow into a world superpower, and a freedom to make as wise or as stupid a law as any other nation in the world. But there are other types of freedoms we need to discuss, today, as well: freedoms given by our Creator and Savior, freedoms recorded long before 1776, freedom to be considered an equal, freedom to forgive, freedom to be liberated from the bonds of addiction, or abuse, or manipulation.

A man has a 1964 Chevy Corvair that he has worked on and pampered over the years. He has replaced valves and belts; put three new steel floors in it due to perpetual rusting out, and has even reupholstered the driver’s seat once or twice. Finally, the car has simply given out and he decides the cost of repairs simply outweigh the sentimental feelings he has for the vehicle. He battles with feelings of failure, but the car simply must be junked.

A pastor has worked valiantly for thirty years to turn the congregation from a **self**-serving, historic, community **landmark** into a **Christ**-serving community **outreach** center. But, consistently, those who want to maintain their positions of prestige and power in the congregation and in the local community government have met his efforts with opposition. Struggle as he may, he realizes the time has come to say “Good-bye” as their pastor and to move on. In his exit interview with representatives of the denomination, he enumerates areas where growth is needed and where that growth will meet with stiff opposition. Without slander or rancor, he states the facts and then leaves to his new call.

A child copes with physical and emotional abuse from her parents for more than twenty years. Silence about the abuse has only allowed it to continue. Self-recrimination about not having spoken out in all that time has caused her to doubt whether authorities (or the courts) would give credence to the claims. Finally, the - at the age of twenty-five - decides to move out and leave no forwarding address: no likely way for the family to follow and continue to inflict pain. To the child, that part of life is over and the parents are - from that moment on - considered as dead.

Each of these is an example of shaking the dust from your feet as a testimony against. All of these are living illustrations of what we’re talking about, in our Gospel Lessons, this morning.

Dust is an important image that carries with it an almost **sacramental** quality throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament - from the book of beginnings through the last of the prophets - we have the symbol of dust signifying life and death. God created humans from dust (in Genesis) and breathed life into them. They return to the dust (in Genesis, Psalms and Ecclesiastes) when that same breath is withdrawn and their time on earth is finished. At one time, it was common for mourners to sit in dust and ashes or to sprinkle dust on their heads in order to symbolize the return of life to God in death. When God condemned Adam and Eve for their disobedience, God **cursed** the ground - the dust - from which they were formed and made it produce pain and hardship until the time would come when they would return to it in death.

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus reminded His missionaries to shake the dust from their feet when they leave a town that would not listen to their message. Strive as they might to bring the good news of salvation to a group of people, they were not to be held accountable if those people wouldn’t accept the Word and change their lives. The very dust of their city was tainted and the disciples were not to carry that stain or infection to the next town. They were not even to allow that dust to stay on their **own** feet, in case it should begin to spoil their message and infect their lives. They were to shake it off - treat that town and its inhabitants as though they were dead - and move on.

The town had been able to hear the Word and was given time (and opportunity) to prepare for Judgment Day. But, rather, it chose to turn itself against the message. Therefore, the judgment against it will reign down from Heaven. The towns visited by the disciples were having the Word brought to them on a silver platter, as it were, and they were either **perverting** it or **ignoring** it! These towns had claimed to be filled with devout Jews who were seeking God’s will in their lives. But, when God’s Messiah and His messengers appeared on their doorstep, the townspeople and their leaders had become so spoiled (and their faith so tainted) that they **rejected** the **message** because it didn’t fit into their comfortable society, and they **despised** the **messengers** because the truth they brought was painful to hear. The dust of that way of life was to be shaken from the disciples’ feet, as a testimony against them.

What does that mean for us, in the 21st Century? Does it mean that we are to give up on something or someone, simply because it’s difficult or because they don’t listen to us? Does it mean that we are to pass judgment on one another after a few moments of conversation? No!

Remember that I said the image of dust has a somewhat **sacramental** quality. It is Jesus’ teaching about what **some** Christians refer to as “the sacrament of failure.” This - by no means - should suggest that we are always doomed to failure (or that we should **strive** for failure in order to be “good Christians”). Instead, we have Jesus’ own guidance about what to do when we **do** fail. He’s saying, “When you meet with disappointment, don’t let let it stop you. Work on possible ways to turn it around, but - when you see that it’s not going to happen, no matter what your efforts might be - simply close that chapter and start the next. There are other towns, other efforts to be made. If the first act doesn’t turn out as you had hoped - or if you can’t see it being productive for God - go on to the second; whether there or somewhere else.” We are to remember that God is rich in resources. We are only responsible for the **efforts**, not for the **results**.

This is true whether we are talking about our relationships, our workplace, or a particular project. For example: A husband and wife have been together for fifty-five years. They have four grown children, several grandchildren, and even a few great-grandchildren. And yet, beginning with their second date and continuing throughout their courtship and their marriage, there has been a history of physical and emotional abuse so violent that the wife has been repeatedly hospitalized for broken bones, injury-induced miscarriages, cuts and bruises. The police have responded to so many complaints of marital disputes at this address that they can almost set their watches and calendars by this family. The neighbors, the children, other family members, and even the **pastor** have suggested to this couple that they should separate until they get some professional help. But, they reject such a notion as contrary to scripture and, thereby, sinful.

Where does the Bible tell us to suffer such abuse? Well, pastor, you should know that Luke 6: 29 says, “To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also.” Do we misinterpret that to mean that instead of standing for what is right, and showing the other person that we will not back down at the first sign of opposition; we are to become that person’s punching bag? Some people do!

Where does that passage say that the other person is permitted to go on hitting us, and we just **keep** offering the other cheek? Friends, we only **have** **two** **cheeks** - or a maximum of **four**, if you count where we are sometimes **kicked** - and God set those limits in our creation for a **reason**. Scripture is telling us that our opponent will see our courage, and will see the hand of God upon us **in** that courage. That person is **supposed** either to back down to a point where we can negotiate, or to be guided by the presence of the Holy Spirit to accept the message and join us in our efforts. Nowhere does it say that the other person is to continue to pummel us and we are to keep taking it - even to our death.

“Well, pastor, what about when Jesus was teaching the disciples and Peter about forgiveness and our Lord said something about forgiving “seventy times seven”? (Matt. 18: 21-22) My friends, you **can** forgive someone an injustice without feeling as though you have to stay where your life is in danger. It **is** possible! In fact, God’s plan for us is **life**, not **death**. Therefore, forgiveness does not necessarily mean that you are forced by God to stay in a relationship where your physical or emotional being is constantly attacked and at risk of being destroyed. Where is the love in that?

Many of us can remember a time in our history when Pope John Paul II was shot in an assassination attempt. After his recovery, he went to visit his assailant in prison. He forgave the man the attack on his life. But, he didn’t stand in front of the assailant, hand him a gun, and tell him to take another shot! He forgave the man, but he didn’t make him a member of the papal security guard, or a member of his private staff. Did he? No! Although his victim forgave this man, he **still** had to face the judgment of the courts and endure the punishment resulting from his criminal act.

Even though a victim of abuse may - in time - forgive the abuser, there is nowhere in the Bible that demands the abuse continue! At no time does the Bible dictate that the victim **must** **remain in jeopardy**. There comes a time when **enough is enough!**

I agree that some may view this as a failure on our part to make the situation better, or to provide a faithful witness to what we have understood God’s message to be. Don’t we learn **more** from our **failures** than from our **achievements**? Yes, God’s message **is** one of reconciliation. Yes, it **is** a message of hope, and of love, and of peace. And, yes, there **are** those examples in history where missionaries have been persecuted and killed for the **sake** of the message. But, even in their **death**, their message has lived on. Those who would oppose it could not kill it, or lessen its effect on the world. But, was their death an absolute **necessity** according to **Scripture**? Or, was it more a necessity for those who were so **convicted** by the message that they couldn’t bear to hear it, any longer; and, in an effort to **silence** the message, they destroyed the **messengers**? I believe you’ll find the latter to be true.

History is rich in examples of complete and utter failure, from which people have gone on to great achievement. Jesus, Himself, met failure in Nazareth. So, He closed that chapter in His life and moved on. There are **many** cases where the **message** wasn’t **understood** until the **messenger** was **gone**. Sometimes, it takes the loss of something before people realize its true value.

Pastors across the ages would argue that Christians are not made for **defeat**, but for **victory**. And that’s so very true. But, just because we’re **made for victory** doesn’t mean we **never encounter defeat**. The **hope** that we have is in the fact that God - through Christ Jesus - has given us a technique for dealing (for coping) with defeat. That technique for failure is for us to go on in **trust**: trust that God has a **higher** purpose for us than to wallow in the dust of rejection, or to struggle against persistent abuse. We are to rely on the God Who never comes to His “last chance,” but Who always has new doors of opportunity to be opened.

What good does it do to sit and wail in our misery? Too often in the human experience … a wailing wall becomes a tombstone.

So, if you have struggled for a long and arduous time to bring a message to someone, and if you have been faithful in your attempts to show God’s love and endure the pain of rejection, or abuse; if you have striven to endure for the sake of the message, but only meet with constant abuse and hurt; then perhaps it’s time to consider closing that chapter, shaking the dust off your feet, and moving on to the next adventure that God has provided for you in your Christian witness and ministry.

These may be painful words for you to hear. This may be a painful suggestion to be considered by those who persist in what has become their comfortable position as your abuser - not to have their accustomed punching bag, any longer. This may truly be a “wake up call” for many who have misread or misinterpreted the Scriptures for so very long. But, the message to me is crystal clear: “God made you for love and for life. God gave us Christ - Who died on the cross in payment for our sin - so we would not have to taste final and ultimate death. God has given us the Holy Spirit to challenge us and to guide us in our witness to the greatness that God has to offer us. Therefore, it stands to reason that God has **never** intended for us to throw away that life (and that love), or to lock it up in a situation where it cannot grow and shine forth for the world to see. If you have made a commitment to witness to that same God, and if you have been struggling against severe opposition for several years, then you **must** consider Jesus’ admonition to shake the dust from your feet - as testimony against that situation - and move on! This is true in family, in work, in specific forms of ministry, in all of life.

Let us pray:

God of Heaven and God of love; in Christ Jesus You taught us to be prepared to turn away when our witness has not been received and to shake from our feet the dust of rejection. By Your Spirit guide our hearts and minds to know the difference between when “enough is enough” and when just one more try might be productive. And, when it **is** time for us to move on, enable our faith to release our hearts from guilt and discouragement, for the sake of a better ministry ahead. In the name of Him Who claims us for You, we pray. Amen.