

God Moves... Past All Obstacles

Part 2 of Sermon Series: *God Moves...*

a sermon based on

Luke 13:31-35

(with reference to Philippians 3:17 — 4:1)

and delivered on

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at

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Wasn't it nice how the Pharisees were looking out for Jesus in that passage that I just read? "At that very hour," that is as he was in the midst of doing the work he'd come to do by teaching and healing and forgiving and restoring hope, "at **that** very hour, some Pharisees came and said to him (and now this is my paraphrase) 'Get outta here. Herod wants your head. Literally!'" (Lk 13:31) Wasn't that just so nice of them to give him that heads up? Bless their sweet hearts... (as a Southerner might say.)

Was it? Was it really that nice? I was gratified to find out that I was in good company with my suspicions along with St. Cyril of Alexandria and St. Augustine to name two. The Pharisees weren't trying to help Jesus out. Instead they were trying to get him to stop what he was doing. How nice of them. Shame on Jesus for healing the sick and restoring sight to the blind. Shame on him for telling people who'd been beat down and told they were worthless (or worse!) because of who they were or where they were born ... shame on Jesus for telling them that God loved them. Shame on Jesus for telling people that Micah was right when he said, "Hear O mortals, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before your God." (Micah 6:8 *paraphrase*) Shame on him for suggesting that God preferred mercy over sacrifice. Shame on him for suggesting that God even loved sinners!

Those things were making Jesus popular. His ministry was exploding. Not too long before, he'd even sent out seventy others to do the work in his name. And it was working. They came back to him and told him that people were being healed of their infirmities and that demons skulking about to exploit their infirmity or weakness were being cast out. Shame on him.

Now you'd think all of this stuff Jesus was doing and teaching would be a good thing. Right? But here's the thing, it undermined the Pharisees. I honestly believe that most of the Pharisees were sincere. But when you get to leaders things start to get a little sketchy. John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton was onto something when he said, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," and maybe even with the next sentence, "Great men are almost always bad men." But only because he included "almost always."

This offer of safety that the Pharisees were offering Jesus was meant to corrupt his work and his teaching. If he were get out of Dodge as they suggested, they would have exploited that detour. That is what we have to do when we come to a barrier. We have to find a way around it. Thereby admitting that we can't beat it. But Jesus refused to fall for it. He didn't doubt that Herod might want him dead. Herod had already killed John the Baptist. His grandfather, Herod the Great, had even tried to kill Jesus when he didn't even know who he was when he sent troops to kill all of the boys in Bethlehem under two years old. This was about power. This was about the fact that if Jesus' message took root, people might start to gain confidence in who they were as children of God rather than lowlifes who deserve their lot whatever it may be.

They'd done a good job of it up until this point. When "that" woman washed Jesus feet with her hair in adoration for helping her to claim God's love and forgiveness. His host, a Pharisee was prepared to chastise him for being so familiar with that sort of person, rather than praising him for giving her hope that she could be better. Everyone knew that God's main concern with us is keeping score so that he can keep as many people out of heaven as possible. {sarcasm} Right?

These things were (and I think – except for universalists – still are) so ingrained in human consciousness that Jesus knew he couldn't let that attitude win. So even though he'd had to go toe-to-toe in the desert with the devil, even though his home town friends were so aggravated with his boldness in proclaiming the Gospel that they were ready to throw him off a cliff, even though people were ready to pick apart everything he did: If he ate he was a glutton, if he had a glass of wine, he was a drunkard; but if he fasted all the time and refrained from all wine like John the Baptist did... well they complained about that too.

To those for whom Jesus' message of healing and salvation to everyone was a threat, they knew he had to be stopped. They were afraid not just of their own waning influence but that Rome might come down on them and all the people. So they tried to find ways to dissuade him from continuing. If they could just get him to go off somewhere deserted and to stay there... If they could make him afraid for his life [aside: They really didn't get it.] then they could keep their comfortable lives and not have their convictions challenged.

In a way we do that, too. Who here really likes change? Especially change when we're comfortable? I don't just mean change from nice things, but things that we're used to. Change – moving on – causes anxiety, because even when things are bad, we know what to expect. So, often we want to keep things the same, even if it means rationalizing things those things that our destroying our lives and our souls. At least we're better than the hypocrites who say, "It's okay for me, but not for you." Instead in our misguided sense of mercy, we say, "You're okay just as you are. And because you're okay, I'm okay just as I am. I don't need to change. I can just dodge those things that challenge my faith or my sense of entitlement to do whatever I want to do. Sometimes others might throw it at us when we try to be and do better than we're really not that good. Exploiting our own self-doubt. But these things are only barriers if we give them power over us. These things are only barriers if we allow them to detract us from growing in faith and faithfulness, however imperfectly that might be.

On an obstacle course, it doesn't matter if you land on your feet after crossing a wall or if you fall face down in the mud. What matters is that you went straight for it and used whatever was at hand, whether it be a rope, a foothold, a boost from a buddy, or just sheer determination to get over. Of course all of those things imply that we want to get over that wall. We don't always. St. Paul knew that. That's what he was talking about in that passage from Philippians that we heard from earlier. Too many people in the church – that's us – too many people were content to say that since God loves me so much, that Jesus died on the cross for me, he doesn't really need or expect me to change. I can call myself a Christian while living as the pagan I've always been. That's a lot easier than trying to climb that wall, or slink under that barbed wire in the mud. But what does that do for us?

Jesus defied every obstacle that people tried to put in his way. When they tried to throw him off a cliff, we spirited away. When they insinuated that he was a lowlife himself for hanging out with sinners, he asked, "Who needs a physician." When that woman wiped his feet with her hair, he pointed out that at least she knew how to show gratitude... and that maybe it was because she actually had something to be grateful for that the host of that dinner didn't. She was able to claim God's forgiveness – she was able to claim his love – because she had the courage necessary to admit that she needed it. When the devil offered him the easy way out in three different ways in the desert, he refused to be dissuaded from his purpose. And now, when he knows his time is short – now, when he knows that things are about to get really brutal for him, he refuses to allow any fear to stand as a barrier between God's salvation and our souls, and he heads right towards it, knowing that instead of landing on his feet, he'll end up on his back in a tomb, but also knowing that he will have conquered the power of sin and temptation leading to his resurrection.

Before Marvin Gaye sang it. Jesus lived it. There wasn't no mountain tall enough – there wasn't no valley low enough, and there wasn't no river wide enough to keep him from getting through for you.

He didn't do that so that he can give up on you now. Whatever obstacles you face, he's there to give you a boost. Whatever obstacles you face, he right there to pull you through when you

find yourself face down in the mud. Whatever obstacles you face, when you feel like your drowning in chaos, he's right there to hold you up as you swim toward shore.

It doesn't matter whether that obstacle is obstinacy. It doesn't matter if it is self-doubt. It doesn't matter if it's self-loathing. It doesn't matter if that obstacle is a fear of questions lest they lead to doubt, or reconsidering those "faithful" corruptions that work their way into even the most sincere believer's heart like they did with the Pharisees. None of that matters, when we turn to him.

God moved Jesus past every obstacle he faced. And there ain't no betrayal loathe enough. There ain't no cross strong enough. There ain't no tomb sealed enough, to keep him from living for you. Remember the day he set you free. You can count on him to move you past every obstacle cast your way.

AMEN.