

God Moves... down the Road

Part 4 of Sermon Series: *God Moves...*

a sermon based on

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

and delivered on

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at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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Back in November, a California woman pled guilty in federal court to scamming six people out for more than \$1 million. So what? Right? We hear about scams all the time, except this woman (I'm not naming her because shaming her isn't relevant to the message today, but you the story was published in the Seattle Times) – this woman's story has a twist. She and her husband had won \$5.2 million in a lottery back in 1989.

Think about that. Even if she/they had decided to take the thirty year annuity payout, they'd still have money coming in today. Even if she only got half (I don't know what happened with her husband but she was the only convicted of the scam) – even if she had only been receiving half, that would be over \$173,000 per year. If she were to have even taken her half of a one half immediate payout – or \$1.3 million, the woman is only 59 now, with even moderate investments, she was set for life. But it wasn't enough.¹

In the Gospel story today – the story that we call the Prodigal Son – the younger son and his brother were set for life. There were two of them. When their father died, the younger one would have received a third of the estate. (Oldest sons got double, but that also came with responsibilities for taking care of other family members.) Not only that, he was pretty secure in the meantime. His father was not some dirt farmer. He could afford to have servants.

Instead he decides that he wants it all now. “Forget the annuity. I want a lump sum payment out of what's here now, instead of waiting for it to grow further.” Never mind that by demanding his inheritance (that is what he would receive upon his father's death) he was effectively telling his father that he was dead to him. This is all before he takes what still could have set him up for life and squandered it.

Then, what about his father? Scripture tells us that when the young man was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; and that he ran out to meet his son. (v. 18) He'd never given up hope for this son. When the elder son complains about the celebration of his return the father replies that this son was dead and has come to life. (v. 32)

Have you every pondered the magnitude of that statement, “This brother of yours (this son of mine) was dead but has come to life.”? I have. I can even tell you the date.

July 29, 2010. I was sitting in a class at Nashotah House seminary outside of Milwaukee, when my phone vibrated. It was Susan. I hit ignore. {aside: We have an understanding} Then it “rang” again. Susan. That's our code that something urgent is afoot. SO I got up from class and called Susan. “There's been an incident in Mount Carroll (that's where I was serving at the time) three young are trapped in the grain bin on Route 64. Wyatt, Alex, and Will.” Will was one of mine. Will was in my first confirmation class at that church. Before I married Susan, Will and his brother, Alan, took care of my pets whenever I was out of town.

I'd asked another pastor to cover for me during my two weeks away (I can't remember who.), but this was big. I called Will's father on his cell phone. I could hear it in his voice waiting outside that grain bin with the other parents and friends. The fire department was there. But people in rural communities know that when someone falls into a grain bin, way more often than not it's a recovery effort not a rescue.

Will had gone into that grain bin willingly – so had Alex. They'd gone in attempting to rescue Wyatt who'd fallen in. I prayed on the phone with the father. I waited for news. I was hours away and there was nothing I could do. I went back to class. I checked in with Susan. Still, no word.

When you've served for several years in a town of less than 1500 people in a county with just over 15,000 (at the time), you know people. I had the coroner's phone number in my phone. (He happened to be the local funeral director). I didn't want to call Will's father for news on the “progress”. I called Matt.

“They’re just now loading Will into an ambulance, so that he can get airlifted to Rockford.” Alex and Wyatt wouldn’t survive. But, for Will there was hope – even if it was strained.

I called his parents to check in and rejoice, but their phones were off by then. I suspect that they needed a break from everyone checking in. Later, I called some friends in an attempt to get word to Will’s parents. His mother was with them. “He’s asking for you. He wants to talk to you.” Now when a 19-year-old kid asks for his pastor by name, that’s big. He was sedated and resting, so I left for Rockford first thing the next morning. I asked my fellow students to explain my absence to the instructor.

When I arrived at St. Anthony’s and asked for Will’s room, I didn’t know what I would find. How bad of shape was he in? Would he pull through? I got into the elevator praying... for Will and for wisdom. Then... the elevator doors opened on the floor – standing – **STANDING** – right in front of me in a hospital gown and holding onto that IV thingy – was Will.

This son of mine was dead! But now he is alive! It’s not that I don’t have faith or that I didn’t, but when I got that first phone call from Susan, realistically, I knew that Will was dead. I would never see him again. But here he was.

That’s how the father in this story felt. He hoped against hope that his son would return, knowing that it was unlikely. Then when he does, he makes a fool out of himself by running – **RUNNING** – grown men don’t run – it was scandalous – but he runs anyway to greet his son. He didn’t point out how hurt he’d been. He didn’t comment on his son’s failure to make due. Instead he dotes on him and celebrates his return.

That father – who Jesus uses as an example for his Father, our God – that father, our Father – yearns for each and every one of us with that same sort of longing.

Regardless of how miserably we may have failed. No matter how confident we may have been in our own devices. No matter that we might have rejected him. He longs to love us and to dote on us. He doesn’t just wait. Even though he gives us the freedom to walk or run away, as soon as we turn towards him there’s no waiting involved, he runs down the road to where we are to embrace us. He doesn’t wait for us get back to the perfect life that he planned, he runs **TO US!**

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” (Jn 3:16-17) God didn’t wait for us. God doesn’t wait for us to be perfect. That’s good news for us. It’s good news to share. It’s good news for us to live, so that we too can love those in our circle who aren’t perfect, but who are yearning for something better.

When we realize that God moves down the road toward us, that God is running for us, we also realize that when we run towards him life gets more exciting and joy comes sooner. **AMEN.**

¹ “\$5.2 million Lottery Winner Admits to Scamming People,” Seattle Times, November 20, 2018; <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/5-2-million-lottery-winner-admits-to-scamming-people/>