

## "Stepping Back to Step Ahead"

Exodus 5:1-5; Luke 5:12-16

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

August 12, 2018 – 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

"Dear Mom and Dad," the letter began, "Sorry to be so long in writing, but all my stationery was destroyed the night my college dorm was burned down by the demonstrators. I'm out of the hospital now, and the doctor says he is hopeful my eyesight should return to normal sooner or later.

"A wonderful guy, Bill, who rescued me from the fire, offered to share his apartment with me until the dorm is rebuilt. He comes from a good family, so I trust it won't upset you when I say that we're planning to get married. In fact, you always said you wanted a grandchild, so I hope you'll be glad to hear that you'll have your wish pretty soon.

Now if you haven't both already fainted, I need to admit there wasn't any fire, I haven't been in the hospital, I'm not pregnant, and don't even have a current boyfriend. It's true, however, that I did get a "D" in my French, but I'm committed to working harder next quarter. Sorry about the way I started my letter out, but I just wanted to make sure that you'd be able to keep the news about my grade in proper perspective. Love, Allison."

Well, that wouldn't be the kind of note we like to get from a daughter or granddaughter, but there's some practicality in her approach. Keeping a perspective is essential in life. If you can't look at a specific incident within the whole of a situation, it can seem out of proportion. When we don't have a vantage point to see things we can quickly lose our angle and direction.

Hikers are advised to stop when you realize you're lost. Then try to find some higher elevation, or even climb a tree, to get your viewpoint back. Otherwise, you're likely to go around in circles.

Sometimes when I get stuck in writing a sermon I have to take a walk or read a chapter in a novel or sit with some quiet music. Usually things are clearer when I get back to the task. Often it's the change of pace or change of scene which helps put things in order again. Ideas begin to flow when we stop pushing so hard and, instead, clear the way for them to come naturally.

Our New Testament lesson today is one of many healing stories we find in Luke. Here a man with leprosy comes to Jesus and begs of him, "Lord, if you choose you can make me clean." In addressing Jesus as Lord, he expresses faith in Jesus not just as a wonder-worker, but as one sent from God. "Jesus stretched out his hand, touched him, and said, 'I do choose. Be made clean.'"

Following this healing the text notes that Jesus' fame was reaching far and wide. Many would gather to hear him teach and the sick would come to be made well. Almost as an afterthought the passage concludes with the observation that Jesus would often "withdraw to deserted places and pray."

This is not the first time we hear of Jesus going away to be refreshed. In fact, it's mentioned often and highlights his common practice of alternating between work and reflection, activity and solitude. The more he had to do, the more the demands upon him, the more it was likely that Jesus would seek to get away and meditate. The faster the pace, the more he stopped. The greater the decisions before him, the more he took them to prayer.

Christ's lifestyle is a decided contrast to the way that most of us live. Modern life is filled with pressures and timelines, tasks to be done and places to go. Our activity is so frantic at times that we can arise feeling more tired than when we went to bed. At the workplace today's byword is "productivity." There is a general anticipation that you will start off running and continue running all through the day.

There are both external and internal pressures to keep going, to keep moving, in life today. Most often those expectations are put upon us by others; sometimes, though, they are self-imposed. There doesn't seem to be any time to sit down. There's no opportunity to catch our breath. Life can be like a treadmill that goes faster every day, and we must continually run harder to even stay in place. Does that sound familiar to anyone?

I led a class on spirituality at another church a few years back. In it there was a session on the need for solitude in our lives. The author of the book made the point that we require time alone and undisturbed so that we can process what we experience in life. "Thinking space" might be another term for it. This may seem like a luxury to some, but he argued that it is an absolute necessity for mental and spiritual development.

In those sessions we had some interesting discussions about solitude and where we find it. For some people it was time spent in a remote place without telephones and interruptions, a spot by a lake or just sitting on an old log in the forest. It could be ten miles from home or a hundred. It could also be lying on the beach with a sea breeze or on skis going cross country after newly fallen snow. All agreed that merely being away, however, doesn't guarantee a person will experience that time as solitude.

Conversely, you can find yourself in a busy environment and still discover some personal space right where you are. You can close the door to your office for a short while and put aside everything that is not part of your inner life. You can take a few minutes as you get in or out of the car to enjoy a private moment where you won't be interrupted. You can even be in the midst of a crowd and still carve out a quiet area inside yourself. But you have to be intentional about it.

Solitude means different things to different people. What we did agree on in that class | is that there has to be time to reflect on your life and its meaning, or the days just swirl and move about uncontrollably and takes you with them.

A baseball player was once asked about his most effective pitch. The sportswriter expected him to reply that it was his curve or slider, or even the fastball for which he was noted. The player surprised the reporter when he said it was the slowest pitch he threw: the change of pace. "You see," he said, "just when the batters get to expecting something hard and fast, I slip them a nice fat slow one and they've already swung through it before the ball even gets to them."

This experienced pitcher knew that if he threw his hard pitches all the time, the batters would soon learn to time them and get their share of hits. His occasional slow pitch kept them off stride and kept them guessing as to what would be coming next.

In our lives, however, I think it is the change of pace which keeps us on stride. It varies our routine enough so that we can gain, or regain, our perspective. Especially through prayer and meditation, it enables us to see beyond the immediate moment and to access the full power that God provides for us.

So, one way that you change your pace in life is to do just what you've done today, and that is to recognize this as the Sabbath and to come here for time spent differently from all the rest of the week. It is to realize that the Lord has given us an opportunity in the cycle of days so that we can step back in order to step ahead. Sometimes we're guilty of packing the day so full that we lose most of its restorative moments, its recuperative powers. In that case the Sabbath isn't at fault; we are.

Even Sunday morning is subject to these same pressures we find elsewhere. For many of us we have to work at relaxing from the tensions of the rest of the week. Often we underestimate the value of just sitting and reflecting, believing that this is not as important as deciding and doing. That's part of our problem. Like the world at large, we question anything that lacks measurable action—even worship. Appearing to be doing nothing doesn't mean that we aren't doing something, even when it's not outwardly visible.

Reflection time should be measured differently from the rest of life. Here the premium is on being, rather than on acting, and on opening ourselves to what God seeks to raise up **in** us. That's a contrast with how we commonly approach time.

A recent study found that the death rate for persons in a critical age group was less for regular churchgoers than for infrequent or non-attenders. So if you need some additional justification for time spent here, even science will support it. For more confirmation of this check out the front-page article in yesterday's *Dispatch*.

Let me challenge you to consider as well today that there is a little bit of the Sabbath in *each* day we live, if we'll just get in touch with it. There's an opportunity to deepen our sense of life, if we will just stop long enough to allow it to sink in. Stepping back in order to step ahead. Counterintuitive, perhaps, but that's the way it works.

Even when life became exceedingly strained, Jesus made prayer and meditation a priority for how he spent his time. If we are to craft our lives around the model he gave to us, then we need to consider his example. We need to look at his ways as well as listen to his words.

Activity without rest, doing without thinking, moving without perspective can cause us to miss completely what we need and hope to find. When it comes to the really important things in life, slowing down has a way of speeding us up in the long run.

I'll end with a handy prayer to remember in this coming week. It goes like this: "Lord, slow me down so that I can see what I need to do. Amen."