

“GOD’S NOT A QUITTER,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, September 18, 2016

In our gospel lesson for this morning we hear two stories that Jesus told. (*Luke 15:1-10*) One is about a shepherd’s recovery of a lost lamb. The other is about a woman’s discovery of a long-lost coin. If you really think about it, neither story makes good practical sense. After all, a shepherd leaving his whole flock behind to rescue a single lamb is jeopardizing the safety of all his other sheep. Likewise, the woman who invites the whole neighborhood in to celebrate the finding of a single lost coin is going to spend more money to entertain everybody than any amount she has just recovered. Nevertheless, Jesus holds up these stories to us as an example of how God feels about us and what he is prepared to do for the sake of our salvation.

If we have any doubt about God’s impractical love for us that Jesus’ stories in our morning gospel passage are intended to underscore, all we have to do look to the broader sweep of the entire bible. At heart, from Old Testament to New, the Bible is an account of God’s determination to save us from ourselves even when we are at our most hapless and hopeless.

Oh, there are times when God seems completely frustrated, his patience and fortitude sorely tried. Remember the day when God levels the immoral cities of Sodom and Gomorrah? (*Genesis 18:20-21, 23-33*) Yet, in a rather pointed dialogue beforehand with the Patriarch Abraham, God makes clear that he would not even consider destroying Sodom or Gomorrah if there could be found within their city limits even a small minion of just men and women. Moreover, before God obliterates Sodom and Gomorrah, God makes sure that Abraham’s just and faithful nephew Lot has an opportunity to escape along with the rest of his household.

Likewise, in Noah’s day, God does seem prepared to completely wash his hands of all of us, sending a great destructive flood. Yet here too he preserves the lives of Noah and his family on the great ark, along with a teeming multitude of animal life. Furthermore, God also vows in that moment never to wreak such total destruction again—at least not before that moment in which he was ready to usher in his final kingdom. Rather poetically, the Bible tells us that God sets a rainbow in the sky as a sign of his promise. (*Genesis 6:1-9:17*)

Subsequently, God lives out that great vow by sending his people prophet upon prophet intended to help us redeem our lives so that we don’t put ourselves at the brink of self-destruction. The role of the prophets is to proclaim anew the ways of love and justice that lend themselves to a faithfully and fruitfully ordered society. And when we ignore the prophets, God sends his own son with the saving message we need to hear. Of course, wouldn’t you know it, we even crucify Jesus! Yet God knows us

so well by this time (if he didn't already know us perfectly well from the start) that he makes Jesus' first coming fool-proof. In sending his own son, who is both mortal and divine, God has fixed things so that even though Jesus dies on the cross, neither his spirit nor message can die. In fact, as we celebrate every Easter, God raises Jesus up from death itself, thereby validating in the deepest, profoundest way possible the enduring, eternal truth of Jesus' salvation message. Through the living ministry of the resurrected Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit, God continues to call upon us to repent of sin and selfishness and to embrace Jesus' way of love and justice in all aspects of our lives.

Yes, God's love is extravagant. If you consider it rationally, God's love *really is* impractical. It's nothing that we deserve. But the persistence of God's love goes to show that, when it comes to our fate and well-being, God is not a quitter. He does not believe in giving up on us. And in the magnanimity and generosity of his love and commitment for us, God sets a standard for all of us to follow. Over long centuries, many Christians have, in fact, followed God's faithful example.

Our ancestors in faith have not been quitters even when the odds against them seemed great and perseverance appeared impractical. Instead, in the name of loving, redeeming God they faced down lions. Nursed lepers. Made sacrifice upon sacrifice without constantly counting the cost. Through it all, they made their lives a blessing to others. And the sheer stamina of their love and courage has inspired many more.

Both the demonstrated love of God and the legacy of our own ancestors in faith who fully believed in God's stubborn love should be an inspiration for us today. Frankly, I think we need that double inspiration. Never in my memory can I recall a time when I have encountered so many people dispirited, discouraged, and doubting. Skepticism, cynicism, and despair reign huge in our lives today. At every turn folks talk about how disgusted they are with politics. And nobody seems to have a good word for any of our public institutions, including schools and churches. Almost all forms of authority are distrusted—and disrespected. We really have become a nation of complainers.

Now, criticism is not always a bad thing. Without critiquing ourselves and others, how will we ever be conscious of what we need to change and improve? But being hypercritical, where we are persistently focusing on what's wrong and what's amiss, can quickly become counterproductive, undermining any conscientious efforts to revise, correct, and improve. We can demoralize ourselves and others to the point where we all just give up. We expend so much time and energy on negative talk that we end up drained and don't have emotional and spiritual resources to get anything positive done. We end up talking ourselves into a ditch.

Sad to say, this is even happening with devout Christians. In the circles I travel I can't count the number of people who talk about our times as end times. Of course, I know that

Christ's second coming can happen at any time. To whatever extent possible, we always need to be prepared. Yet every generation since Jesus' death has lived in expectation of his second coming and we're still here.

The past two thousand years should teach us a lesson. As much as we need to be prepared for the second coming of Christ, we also need to be prepared to wait—and maybe a very long time. Ultimately, an obsession with end times may actually represent a faith deficit where we're set to throw the towel in on this world before God is. Our human impatience and active desire to see the curtain come down on life as we know it may actually constitute a failure on our part to trust God's ability and demonstrated will to redeem a bad situation and renew us and the world in accordance with his purposes and plan.

I, for one, believe in God's incredible power to renew and redeem all things. I hope you believe in that power too. I love the third verse of a hymn we often sing in this church on Sunday mornings called "This is my Father's World." The third verse goes: "Our God has made this world; oh, let us ne'er forget, that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet." Those are precious words to embrace.

One of the unspoken rules of God's creation is that positive begets positive, just as negative begets negative. When we truly trust in God and his extravagant love, good things are more likely to happen. Counting on God's love, we need to be positive and do our part to help good things happen for our lives and the lives of others.

Right now in our mass media, we have two tele-evangelists, Joyce Meyer and Joel Osteen, who are very popular. Whatever their renown, I don't think we can call either of them great biblical prophets. Nevertheless, in the face of so much negativity in our world at large they *are* each being prophetic for our own day and age and saying what needs to be said when they encourage us to have faith and to stay positive. Osteen's message is that positive is as positive does. In her own unique, inimitable way, Joyce Meyer says just about the same thing. In other words, as both Osteen and Meyer attest, we can just stew in our own negativity or, as a better alternative, think faithfully and act positively to set in motion a change of circumstances for our life. Just wishing won't get us anywhere good. Only positive-minded thinking, praying, and doing can and will. And, as Joyce Meyer puts it, God can't help us drive a parked car. We have to put it in gear first.

In our present time, we all need to be taking personal inventory. Where is our heart, mind, and soul? And where is our faith? Do we still believe in God's extravagant love as preached by Jesus? Do we truly trust in the power of God, who raised Jesus from the grave, to raise us from whatever mud that seems to swamp us now? Are we positive or negative people? To what extent are we through our own distrustful and doubting outlook adding to the misery index of life at large today?

Just as saying yes to God and Jesus is a personal decision, being positive is a choice that is ours to make. Strengthened by our faith in God's love and the grace of Jesus Christ, we don't have to let events and circumstances dictate how we are going to think or feel. Regardless of what is going on all around us, we can ultimately control our own mood, attitude, and outlook. Is our glass half-empty or half-full? The decision we make, the outlook we embrace, can make all the difference in the world.

My parents, who raised their four sons never to be quitters, many times over shared with us the story of the two shoe salesmen who separately travel to the same distant land hoping to establish a beachhead for their company's product. Upon arrival, the first shoe salesman soon calls home to say, *Don't bother shipping any shoes out here; nobody wears them.* However, the second salesman calls back excitedly, saying, *Triple the shipment you planned to send me. Everyone's barefoot. No one is wearing shoes!* Where one guy saw only a dead end, another recognized opportunity and had the confidence he could make something of it. If we are the people of faith and really do trust that we have a gracious and loving God who doesn't want to leave us high and dry, we should have the confidence that God will make a path for us through whatever mess we encounter if we hang in there and stay attentive to the opportunities that he makes possible.

Not long ago, the social commentator Malcolm Gladwell wrote a book on the uses of adversity. Inspired by the biblical story of David and Goliath, he began to examine other situations where the little guy or gal has prevailed against all odds in battling a big foe or a big problem. What he found is that a deep faith and a positive attitude matters. If we believe we can do something, there's a good chance we can, even if we start out as an underdog.

In his research Gladwell discovered that adversity can actually work to our advantage if we persevere. Gladwell notes, for instance, that while a high number of people in jail today suffer from dyslexia, which is a reading disability, there are a surprising number of dyslexics also populating America's businesses. Indeed, some of our nation's most wildly successful entrepreneurs, like the broker Charles Schwab, Kinko's founder Paul Orfalea, and John Chambers who launched a hundred billion dollar Silicon Valley company, are dyslexic. So are 35 per cent of America's small business owners.

Apparently, their early battles coping with dyslexia encouraged them to tap other talents that could help them navigate around their problem. They ended ahead of the game in thinking out of the box. They focused on what they could do, rather than what they couldn't. It was good preparation for the rest of the lives.

All this resonates with me because I had my own problems with learning disabilities as a kid—to my parents' considerable despair. Later, they were shocked that I did as well as I

did in college and graduate school, after I had learned to work around the deficits that I brought to the classroom. As it turned out, my own learning problems made me more sympathetic to other people with problems, which is not a bad trait, particularly if you're called to become a minister.

Experience, informed by my own faith, has taught me that no door in life is ever slammed in our face through misfortune without another door waiting to be opened down the hall. God is that good. We just have to step back from the closed door and start walking down that hallway, checking for the door that is unlocked and ready for us to open.

Congregation, we all need to have more faith in God, trusting in his goodness. And rather than wasting so much emotional energy complaining about everything down from the state of our nation to the way one of those baristas make our morning coffee, we need to get doing positively and constructive so that we contribute to the necessary solutions, rather than standing there as part of the problem. Jesus assured us that faith can move mountains. May faith move us to be more hopeful, positive, and constructive people. **Amen.**