

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Robert Alexander
“Learning to Walk”
Leviticus 19:1-2 and Colossians 1:21-23
3rd Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2016

9:45 Stuff

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLq3kV55ESw> (babies walking)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wo1CYIRDz8g> (St. Vincent)

In the beginning of Henry David Thoreau’s essay “Walking” he writes the following, “I have met with but one or two persons in the course of my life who understood the art of Walking, that is, of taking walks, - who had the genius, so to speak, for *sauntering*.” He goes on to explain that the word saunter comes from the Middle Ages when those looking for charity would claim to be on pilgrimage to the Holy Land – a la Sainte-Terre. So it came to be that people would say “There goes a Sainte – Terror” a saunterer...a Holy Lander.ⁱ Thoreau goes on to invite the reader to consider that the art of walking is indeed a call to journey to the Holy Land. To be able to get up and go out on an adventure into the wilderness of God’s world is a blessing and a gift that should not be disregarded or taken for granted.

I remember many walks, hikes, and adventures taken behind my house in the North Carolina mountain woods or on a farm where there was no highway noise or road for miles. It is in such a place where one can truly breath and think and remember the gift and purpose of life that we have been given by God. It is on such a walk where one can truly begin to open up to the leading of the Holy Spirit without the distractions of the busy world.

But we will often choose to play it safe and stick to the things we know and not venture out of our comfort zones. We may be more likely not to accept the invitation to be a *saunterer* – a Holy Lander due to our own fear or anxiety. And if this is our choice for long enough, we may even find ourselves unable to walk due to our lethargy or apathy or even our arrogance. Our laziness might lead us to not caring at all which in turn may lead us to think that we don’t need this “Holy Land” journey after all.

Of course at this point you know I am not just talking about a walk in the woods, but about something much greater which is the walk of faith. This journey of faith, much like the walking that Thoreau imagines, is an adventure that takes us beyond ourselves and all that we know to experience something of heaven on earth. It takes us from our own finiteness into the eternal. The walk takes us from lives opposed to or at least unconcerned with the things of God to lives filled with Holy Spirit purpose.

Our texts this morning make it clear that we are invited on this journey by God. The invitation to “be holy” in Leviticus and the encouragement to remain “steadfast in the faith” in Colossians are both examples of God’s desire for us to take a journey to the holy land. And Paul tells us just how we are equipped to do that. As those who have heard the good news of the gospel, we are aware of God’s reconciling love. This has drawn us from a life that was far from God - where we were estranged from God - and has now brought us to a restored relationship. Through Christ’s sacrificial love, Paul writes, we

are presented to God as holy and blameless – without fault. Now folks – **that** is GOOD NEWS and we shouldn't lose sight of it!

Last week in Mary Margaret's sermon, she mentioned several theological words that are part of this whole reconciliation business. She said it would be ok if I talked a little bit about the two words she did not define last Sunday – that is – **Justification** and **Sanctification**.

The word **Justification** comes from a Greek word which the Apostle Paul used in the New Testament letters to signify the act by which God brings humanity back into proper relationship with him. In the reformed tradition we have understood this to happen primarily through the act of divine forgiveness. Through Christ's sacrifice an unworthy person no longer has his or her guilt reckoned against them. Through faith, the individual is renewed in their heart. In other words, through Christ's sacrificial love, our own sin is forgiven and we are cleansed of our guilt and reconciled to God through faith. Paul said it succinctly when he wrote to the Ephesians, "By grace you have been saved through faith."

Sanctification, based on the Latin word *sanctus*, which means Holy is then the process by which new life is given to a person of faith by the Holy Spirit. The individual is released from the compulsive power of sin and guilt and is enabled to love God and neighbor.ⁱⁱ Paul, when writing to the Galatians wrote about "The Fruit of the Spirit." These qualities are evident in the life of the person of faith as they are sanctified by the Holy Spirit. As we are made holy, we are more able to produce the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, and all the other fruit of the Holy Spirit.

But the work of the Holy Spirit in the person of faith does not make them "perfect." Rather, it makes their heart, mind, soul, and strength more available for that faithful walk with God. Being Holy, then, removes the focus from sin and guilt, and places it on a complete devotion to God in every area of life.

So when we read the command in Leviticus to "be holy for the Lord our God is holy" we can understand it as an invitation to walk with God. When we are walking with God, we are not walking apart from God. When we are walking in the light of God we are not walking in darkness. When we are walking with God we are walking toward the Holy Land – not away from it! But learning to walk in this way takes time and patience and motivation and determination. It isn't something that the Spirit does in us as we sleep. We learn to walk by going out to take a walk!

All of us have probably seen babies as they are learning to walk. They need encouragement, support, and lots and lots of chances to figure out standing up, balance, and movement. I remember helping each of our children learn to walk and how exciting it was at first and then how exhausting it was when they became more mobile and it was hard to keep up with them.

(Video Clip of Babies Learning to Walk)

As babies grow they begin to understand tastes and sounds and experiences. They are motivated to move to engage with those things which they enjoy – music – toys – food – sights – love! These things motivate children to learn to walk. If they are around other children they are also motivated by what they have seen others do. They might be thinking, "Hey – if that kid can do it then I can too!"

Several members of our congregation happen to be physical therapists and they were generous to share with me about their work as it relates to walking. One of them told me about how she thought of one of the songs we sang this past week while she was at work. The song is "Holy Hands." "Holy hands, God's given us holy hands. God works through these hands and so these hands are holy." Whenever we are doing the work of God in a loving way it can be holy work and I am especially grateful today for the work that our Physical Therapists do.

Some of you in the congregation today have been through times when you lost the ability to walk and you had to go through some therapy or rehabilitation so that you could learn to walk again. For those who are in bad accidents or who are unable to walk for long periods of time, the process to regain mobility is extra difficult and takes much longer.

I am told that one job of a physical therapist is to be a cheerleader – all day long. When someone is struggling and they are in pain – learning to stretch muscles that they haven't used in ages or regaining mobility in their legs that have been stationary for months – they need encouragement. They need to be reminded of what waits at the end of the road. They need to set goals and celebrate the small successes. They need to be surrounded by the love and support of family and friends who will stick by them as they learn to walk. Some of you have been through this and you know exactly what I am talking about. Someone learning to walk again needs to be reminded to set their sights on a long term goal and then to manage that through attainable steps. They may need the support of crutches or a walker or a cane. They will certainly need the expertise of someone who has been there before. And over time, through the pain and the struggle and the discomfort and the moments of exasperation, they are able to walk again. They are able to put one foot in front of the other and move about all by themselves. Before you know it they are out and about in the world on some adventure somewhere.

The Apostle Paul, when writing to the Colossians, reminded them of the importance of hanging in there – of persevering – of being established. One Greek word that Paul used actually means "grounded." It speaks of the earth – of a firm foundation – of two feet planted in the dirt standing their ground and refusing to topple over in the walk of faith. Paul reminded the church that they must not be drawn away from the hope of the gospel – that is – the good news that we have been reconciled to God and that we are saved by grace through faith and are being made holy by the power of the Holy Spirit. The word Paul uses here is not used anywhere else in the New Testament! "Don't swerve away from this hope!" Paul told them. Like a good physical therapist, he encouraged and cheered them on. He explained to the church that in order for them to walk – they couldn't give up on the goal that was set before them. They and we are called to live it out each and every day – through the pain and through the triumph – with the help of the Holy Spirit and the community of faith – together we will arrive in the Holy Land.

I would like for us to take a look at part of our *Brief Statement of Faith* found on Page 38 of your hymnal. I invite you to read Lines 52-76 with me.

52 We trust in God the Holy Spirit,

53 everywhere the giver and renewer of life.

54 The Spirit justifies us by grace through faith,

55 sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor,

56 and binds us together with all believers

57 in the one body of Christ, the Church.

58 The same Spirit

59 who inspired the prophets and apostles

60 rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture,

61 engages us through the Word proclaimed,
62 claims us in the waters of baptism,
63 feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation,
64 and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.
65 In a broken and fearful world
66 the Spirit gives us courage
67 to pray without ceasing,
68 to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
69 to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
70 to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
71 and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.
72 In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
73 we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
74 and to live holy and joyful lives,
75 even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
76 praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

These words from our **Book of Confessions** remind us of the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to teach us to walk in the ways of God. They challenge us to remain steadfast in the faith and to not swerve away from the hope of the gospel but to live into the invitation to Be Holy as God is Holy!

Through prayer and scripture and song, through study and service and stewardship, through daily spiritual practices which invite us to turn our attention more and more to the ways of God modeled for us in Jesus Christ we learn to walk. We join together with the youngest members of our faith community putting one foot in front of the other, finding our balance when we stumble, and helping each other up when we fall.

And when we lose our way or we forget how to walk we rely on each other as encouragers, cheer leaders, motivators, and even crutches until we can stand together and walk out into the wildness of God's world and together make our journey to God's Holy Land. May it be so!

To God be the Glory! Amen.

ⁱ Henry David Thoreau, "Walking" in The Works of Henry David Thoreau. Crown Publisher. 1981. P.371

ⁱⁱ Van A. Harvey, A Handbook of Theological Terms (Simon & Schuster. 1992)