

Chapel Hill United Church of Christ

Sunday Sermon

Going Backward or Going Forward

Mark 12: 28-34
Ruth 1: 8-18

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November 1, 2009

“Do not press me to leave you or turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

Prayer: Let us walk with you, O God, on the foundation of Christ’s word. Amen.

Instant replay is in the news lately especially on the professional sports level. In fact, there is some amazing technology out there assisting the umpires and referees. In the NFL, slo-mo cameras “see” everything, right down to where the knee touches down giving the officiating crews the precise place to spot the ball. The game sometimes gets stopped just so that the head ref can review the preceding play to determine if the human call on the field was correct, and if there is enough video evidence to overturn the human call. In Major League Baseball, the only time “video will be used only on so-called ‘boundary calls,’ such as determining whether fly balls went over the fence, whether potential home runs were fair or foul, and whether there was fan interference on potential home runs (<http://sports.espn.go.com/mlb/news/story?id=3554357>). Last night, Alex Rodriguez (A-Rod) hit what was at first called a double, then ruled a homerun.

Some would say that technology is pushing the game forward, making calls more precise and accurate helping to ensure fairness on the field and in the game. Others would say that technology is taking the game backwards, because it takes the “human element” out of the game. Some humans aren’t perfect (gasp!) and humans will make “bad” calls from time to time, and that is part of the game.

The reality with anything “going forward” is that sometimes new standards can be set. In the NFL, instant replay is now the new standard for all close calls because most, if not all plays are “reviewable upstairs.” But Major League Baseball Commissioner, the 74-year-old Bud Selig, who described himself as “old fashioned” and an admirer of baseball’s “human element,” wants to keep the old standard. He said, “I really think that the game has prospered for well over a century now doing things the way we did it” (<http://sports.espn.go.com/mlb/news/story?id=3554357>).

We live amid all this technology, we live with new standards and lifestyles being created everyday, we live with things going forward and progressing all the time, and we have to live in the midst of all this as Christians and as people of faith. Sometimes serious questions are asked as to whether or not we are progressing too fast, or whether or not a particular direction of forward progress really is a good direction in which to go. Should the old standard be replaced? Or,

is the new standard a step forward? As Christians living in our fast-changing world, we are required to sort all this out.

One way to sort it out, I think, is that sometimes, we have to look backward as we go forward. Forward progress is inevitable, but we probably would lose our way if the foundational point is lost. In the NFL, for example, even though there are the virtual lines on TV showing where the line of scrimmage is and where the first down line is, the refs still rely completely on the old-fashioned sticks and ten yard chain. And Lord knows, some games are won or lost on where those measuring sticks line up.

As Christians, our foundational point is to go backwards to Jesus for our measuring stick as we live with our culture's forward progress. And interestingly enough, our first text today has Jesus was looking backwards at Moses' law when he was asked about which commandment is the first of all. So, we can look there, too. He quotes Deuteronomy 6:4 which is known as the "*Shema*" and is still quoted by Jews today. And he also quotes another passage from Leviticus 19:18 about loving neighbor and self. So, in the midst of our forward progress, our measuring sticks are that our lives are grounded in a holy God, whom we are to love completely, and we are to use that love as a springboard into loving neighbors and ourselves. Every other standard plays second-fiddle to those two standards.

Every second of our forward pushing lives is grounded in God and the love of God which we see when we look backwards at our rich heritage and faith ancestors.

A few years ago, a radio station, FM 106 had a contest. “Just for fun, tell us your first words you said when you rolled out of bed. The third caller will win \$106.” One third caller said, “Do I smell coffee burning?” Another said, “Honey, did I put the dog out last night?” In the background a gruff muffled voice said, “No, you didn’t.” One caller said, “You want to know my first words?” Yes, please.” “I said, ‘Shema Israel! Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is One’” (Sermon Resources for November 1, www.esermons.com, retrieved October 28, 2009). Good way to start the day—going backward to the foundation of faith in order to go forward through the day.

Our second text serves as a wonderful metaphor illustrating another dimension to going forward in faith. That dimension is that we always have choices in the direction we pursue. Naomi tells both her widowed daughter-in-laws that they should go back to their homeland while she goes on to Judah. They would have a much better chance of finding new husbands there instead of in Judah. Orpah agrees and chooses to go back to her life in Moab, which is a pagan culture. She can worship her gods, find a new husband, and acquire a familiar, secure life.

Ruth, however, chooses the opposite. She begs Naomi to not force her to go back to Moab. Instead, Ruth is determined to go forward with Naomi, but not only that, she chooses to incorporate EVERYTHING about Naomi's culture into her own life. Ruth will live where Naomi lives, and Naomi's people will become Ruth's people, and Ruth will die in the land where Naomi will die. But, here's the big one, Naomi's God will be Ruth's God. Amid all the old standards of pagan gods which Ruth was used to, amid all the uncertainties Ruth faced in this new land, she chose to go forward with Naomi learning about and worshiping Naomi's God, a holy God of love.

We are encouraged to do the same thing. Go forward squarely standing on the foundation of our holy God of love. And, anything in our lives that doesn't reflect our holy God of love has to be phased out. Ruth had to phase out old standards and old lifestyles so that her new life as a kinswoman of Naomi would take hold. For us, going forward might mean for us to chip away at anything in our lives that doesn't have God's qualities of love, mercy, tenderness, or grace in them.

There's an old story of a man who had a huge, unattractive boulder in his front yard. He grew weary of it and decided to take advantage of it and turn it into an object of art. So, with a hammer and chisel, he chipped away at it and carved a beautiful elephant. It was gorgeous and breath-taking. When asked how did he

carve such a marvelous likeness of an elephant, he replied, “I simply chipped away at everything that didn’t look like an elephant.”

If you have anything in your life right now that doesn’t look like love, with God’s help, chip it away at it. If there is some action that doesn’t have compassion in it, some thought that doesn’t do justice to another, some words that are filled with prejudice or vengeance, choose to go forward in faith, rather than backwards in bad habits. Let God help you chip away at these so that you can better reflect that God is your focal point in all things within your life... that God’s love is your primary action in your life. Go forward knowing that God loves you deeply, fondly, passionately.

These are standards I think we are called to live by as go forward these days. The standards are grounded way back there in the rich heritage of our spiritual ancestors. May we replay those standards often and continuously, and may we walk forward on Christ’s word as our foundation. Amen.