

# Take Care How You Kick Over the Traces

*Scripture: Isaiah 1:1-6; Luke 15:11-16*

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*Transcription of the spoken sermon*

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We're thinking, in these days, about organized religion, its institutional forms, and last week I noted that it can be an oppressive and de-humanizing force in one's life. Bad religion has destroyed a lot of people. But, we also noted its importance, its critical importance, because religion is that which relates us to that which is beyond us, and puts us in connection, in communion with God. So, it's not a matter of ridding ourselves of religion, but it is a matter of understanding religion's true function and what its true message really is.

I clipped an article from yesterday's *Grand Rapids Press*. The headline says, "Church Attendance Reaches 20-Year Low." It's the research of a certain George Barna who has written a number of things about the contemporary scene, at least over the last decade, maybe two, and in this news report, he tells us that we have perhaps been lulled to sleep by the fact that the percentage of people who attend church has remained rather constant, but to remain constant in a growing population is like feeling good about the fact that I'm still making just as much as I made in 1960. The Church is losing ground and this article says that we are at a 20-year low. His comments about it reveal that all denominations, including conservative Protestants, have grown slower; there's been a very large decline in institutional religion. Young people especially are confused about morals and not familiar with religious tradition, and the global youth culture has become pluralistic and relativistic. I don't think anybody's doing much to help them sort it out. And then the commentator said it's not just a phase they're going through. There's less reason to say they'll come back when they never went in the first place. The reserves of religious tradition are dwindling.

I believe that's true, and I believe that the frantic activity of much of the institutional church is an attempt to stem a tide and not very successfully. A few weeks ago in *The New York Times Magazine*, the magazine that's included in the Sunday edition of the Times, there was a brief article on the Willow Creek Church west of Chicago, which has become such a phenomenon in our day and has spawned so many look-alike congregations called "seeker congregations." It's been a very successful movement. But, the insight of the columnist in this particular magazine article was that the truth is in the packaging. In other words,

the success has been a success in marketing, and while marketing is not unimportant, it is not what is ultimately important, for in this little article, a representative of the Willow Creek Church said with some pride, "And we have not changed one article of our belief."

And I want to say, "Shame on you." If you think you can take that old core and not re-examine it and bring it to new expression in a new day and in a culture that is radically changing all about us, if you think that you can take that old core and simply dress it up and put it in a shiny package and sell it, the success will be temporary because you have not dealt with the issue in depth. Good religion needs to be very clear about the message it presents and about its function, which is to be an agent, a means, not an end in itself. Good religion is a means to enabling the people to come into communion with God and to experience God in the depths of their being. The message is critical, and what is the message? The message is that God is love.

Well, ho-hum, right? Haven't we always heard that God is love? But, I mean God is love in the deepest biblical sense, the most radical sense of love, that which came to expression in Israel in its best understanding. My text says that the "ox knows its owner and the ass its master's crib, but Israel does not know; my people does not consider." This is the portrait of God throughout the whole of Hebrew scriptures, the God Whose hands are always outstretched, the God Who pleads with God's people, the God Who never turns away but always beckons. In this context, a little further along the chapter - "Come, let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." Farther on in that same prophecy:

"Come, seek ye the Lord while he may be found. Call ye upon him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous one his thoughts, and let him return to the Lord and he will have mercy upon him and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

Throughout the whole of Israel there was this pleading note of a pleading God with outstretched arms, waiting only to embrace the one who would return, coming to one's senses, coming home.

But, of course, the consummate expression of it is in the parable of the Prodigal Son, which is terribly misnamed. It's not a story of a prodigal son; it's not a story of a son at all; it's the story of God, of a father, of an unquenchable love, of an irresistible grace, of a love that is unconditional and irresistible in its appeal to God's children. The context is important. It's the third of three stories. The first is the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep. The second, the woman who searches the house for a lost coin. And then this story of a father who had two sons.

Jesus was responding to the criticism of his life and ministry. In the opening of the 15th chapter, those who represented institutional religion in the day of Jesus

were grumbling. They were grumbling because they said he receives and eats with sinners. And as you've heard me say many times, the mark of Jesus' ministry, the way in which he embodied his message, was in the table fellowship that he practiced. Even for us to break bread together, to sit at a meal together is an expression of intimate friendship. But, in Jesus' day it was especially the case. You did not break bread with that one who was not friend. You did not share a meal with the outcast or the alien or the estranged. And in the temple religion of the day with its code of holiness, it was very clear who was in and who was out. There was a kind of exclusion practiced. And the reason that the temple authorities were grumbling at Jesus was because Jesus went against the conventional wisdom, he went against what everybody else was doing. He opened his heart and he opened his table to all comers. No one was excluded. And that was threatening to the institutional religion of the day, and they grumbled.

And so, as Jesus always did, he responded with a story: There was a father who had two sons. There was a younger son who was a rebel who asked for his inheritance early on and who left home and wasted his life, ending up in decadence and despair. And there was an obedient son who followed the letter of the law, but grudgingly so with a kind of inward resentment over against the father that was as painful to the father as was the rebellion of the other. There was a father who had two sons, both of whom broke the father's heart.

So, for two or three weeks, let's think about this old story. Maybe you say, "How can you say anything new about that old story?" Well, I wonder myself, but let's try. Let's focus primarily this morning on that younger son. For him to ask for his inheritance and to leave home was a radical request that was unheard of. In his culture, in Jesus' day, what he was really asking for was the death of his father. He was cutting himself loose from his whole legacy, everything that was sacred and holy, everything that was home. For in that day more than our own, a person was identified by a father's house, by the village from which he stemmed. All of his life, that was his identity. His total social security was in belonging to a house and to a village and to a community. That's who he was. And so, the request of this young man was a horrible request that implicated him in the wish for the death of his father.

I don't know whether Sigmund Freud ever talked about this parable or not. I've never seen a reference to it, but I think he could have done a lot with it because, according to Freud, the origin of religion is in the wish for the death of the father which then creates guilt which then needs atonement. I don't think Freud had it all right by any means, but I wonder without reading Freud back into Jesus or taking contemporary psychological insights that we do have from the behavioral sciences and reading them into the parable, I wonder if Jesus was not essentially, intuitively, instinctively understanding that there is within us that which would leave home.

As a matter of fact, I think the two sons are not two different sons; I think the two sons live in all of us, whether it be two sons or two daughters, both reside in the heart of each of us and there is in each of us that which would leave home, that which would rebel, that which would cut loose. And I suspect that Jesus understood that as an observer of human nature and human behavior. He didn't need Freud to tell him about that; he didn't need our modern psychological insights to know that. Truth and illumination were not born in the 20th century. And if we walk around that for a moment, I wonder if Jesus was really condemning that leaving of home altogether because we have learned, have we not, that it's necessary to leave home. Now, in the maturation process of every individual, is it not true that we must go through a process of individuation? Must we not separate? Doesn't every parent want a son or a daughter to move from under their roof and to find that kind of independence that will bring to expression the fullness of that person?

I shake my head at how in earlier years I preached this parable and it's still being preached that way all over the church, as though this is the parable of the Prodigal Son and as though it is a warning to young people that there are great dangers in loose living. That is to trivialize this story. As a matter of fact, aimless freedom or autonomy, in this case, can lead to decadence and destruction. There's no question about that. But, that's not what Jesus is talking about. Jesus is talking about that within us that necessarily and normally and naturally must find its own independent expression. And I think what Jesus is saying is that's a very perilous journey. Well, it is a perilous journey, isn't it? Is there a parent among us that doesn't hold their breath when our youth are going through that process?

A few weeks ago my elderly sisters came up to visit Nancy after her surgery and one of my sisters is here today, but I talk about my sisters once in a while because they hear the tapes and they feel good just to know that I'm still thinking about them, but my sisters were remarking about what a nice boy I was, what a nice child, and the fact that as a youth I never brought any grief to my parents. The years of adolescence when one ought to be separated, I just sort of lollygagged along and didn't cause any particular concern, to which Nancy responded that she sort of wished that I would have gone through my adolescence when I was with my parents rather than with her.

I don't know whether we just go through our adolescence one time. I was comforted hearing one psychologist speak one day who said for the male, adolescence is from 17 to 47. But, as a matter of fact, folks, it is necessary for us to move away from home in order that we can be at home with who we are, and it is a perilous process. My sermon title this morning is, "Be Careful How You Kick Over the Traces," because the pitfalls are many and potential disaster lies around every corner, and there is no parent that has not had sleepless nights over a son or a daughter who was struggling to find themselves. And it isn't just the adolescents. Those of us who are old enough to have children and grandchildren

know that there is never a time when our children get beyond the pale of our concern and are not the subjects of our prayers. To be human isn't easy, and to find that kind of independent expression of the fullness of our own person - that doesn't come without some struggle and some serious mistakes and often some pain and some dreadful hurt.

But, that's really enough about that younger son, because that's not the focus of the story. As I said, the focus of the story is the father. That father in the story is a window that Jesus offers us into the very heart of God, and if good religion is to reflect accurately the nature of God, then it must listen to Jesus in this story, because if the son's request is outrageous, then the father's response is incredible! For, what does he do? He gives him the goods and lets him go. And that is the point at which it is most difficult for us to emulate the behavior of God, this God reflected in this story by Jesus. He loves him and lets him go and stands by the side of the road, trembling, watching and waiting, hoping that this one will return. That is the picture of a love that is unconditional. It is the story of a relationship whose bonds are love with no other strings attached. And even those of us who love our kids find that there are times when we get into a tug of war and a battle of the wills and, love them as we may, our own egos do get involved. There is a power struggle often before parents and child come to reconciliation and peace. But, that's the amazing thing about the biblical nature of God - that God loves and lets go and keeps arms outstretched, waiting for the free and uncoerced return.

This is where the Church has failed so miserably and not just the Church, but institutional religion, period. For institutional religion moves into the role of parent, not after the model of God, but after the model of the human parent, the stern, demanding parent, the parent that, if Freud has any truth at all in him, is the parent that we would kill, the parent that we must flee, the parent that we rebel against. The Church becomes the upholder of virtue and of morals, the guardian of society's values; the Church condemns and excludes, draws lines, and to that extent conveys a distorted image of God and sets forth altogether the wrong message, for that message is being rejected en masse! Institutional religion is being left in droves because there is that within the human person that simply will not remain in that position of childhood and servitude and, consequently, God is dishonored through God's own people.

I said the message is God is love and you said, "Ho-hum, so what else is new?" That is new, that God is that loving, that love is that unconditional, that love is finally irresistible, that to the rebel, there is finally nothing against which to rebel! There is no barrier that needs to be overcome; there is no seawall against which to break one's waves, for God stands with arms outstretched and the only thing that can break the rebellion is a love in which there is no fight, and if I read this story accurately at all, that's the amazing news of that which Jesus taught and in his life embodied - that God is love, period.

How do you fight love? When the son comes home, no questions are asked, no condemnation is offered, just salty tears and arms that embrace. Because all that God is ever about is to bring God's children home.

Years and years ago I read an old sermon illustration; it's about as musty as the book in which it now resides. It's about a son who left home with brokenness with his father and went out and got rid of all of the rebellion and came on hard times and sent a letter to his father saying on such and such a day I will pass by the house. If I would be welcome, tie a white handkerchief in the branch of the old apple tree in the front yard. And as he approached the homestead with heart pounding, he saw not a handkerchief tied in the apple tree. He saw hundreds of white handkerchiefs tied to every branch of the apple tree, because finally, all the divine parent wants is for you to come home. I invite you this morning, whether you're young and rebellious or old and crotchety, why don't you come home? Come on home.