

## *Speaking Truth in Love: Time to Get Up and Go*

Third Sunday of Pentecost  
Philip Amerson

June 23, 2019  
I Kings 19:1-15a; Galatians 5:13-15; Luke 8:26-39

Galatians 5: <sup>14</sup> *For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* <sup>15</sup> *If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.*

**Prayer:** O Christ of Pentecost, Come as the fire and burn. Come as the wind and cleanse. Come as light and reveal. Convict, convert, consecrate until we are holy thine. Amen.

### **Introduction: Declare how much God has done for you!**

A week from today, Elaine and I will start our journey back to Bloomington, Indiana. This year has gone by too quickly and so many of you have been good and generous in letting us join you in ministry. Our scripture lessons today seemed to carry little messages for me as I prepare to leave. There it is in Luke 8:39: Jesus has freed the man of his demons and sends him on his way with the words: **"Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you."** Then, there is the story of the prophet Elijah in I Kings chapters 18 and 19. The angel of the Lord has to keep prodding the prophet forward – **Get up Elijah – keep moving.** Declare God's goodness and God's desires to save the people. **"Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you."** It is a good word for me, and for you.

### **I. Declare the Goodness of God**

- a. A newspaper cartoonist in Great Britain a few years ago amused himself one summer day by sending telegrams to twenty acquaintances he selected at random. Each message contained only one word, "Congratulations." As far as he knew, not one of them had done anything in particular to be congratulated for. However, each one took the message as a matter of fact. Several wrote him a letter or called him with a of gratitude... they weren't certain anyone had noticed and appreciated his affirmation. Everyone who received the message had done something that they regarded as clever and worthy of congratulations.
- b. Declare what God has done! A compliment, you see, is verbal sunshine. It can make a difference in a desert of despair and grievance. "How will I give people courage to do their best?" "Do you build other people up or tear them down?" **April 28, 1991** -- Forty thousand fans were in the Oakland stadium watch as Rickey Henderson ties Lou Brock's career stolen base record. Brock left baseball in 1979 but had faithfully followed Henderson's prestigious career. Realizing that Henderson would set a new record, Brock said, "I'll be there. Do you think I am going to miss it now? Rickey did in 12 years what took me 19. He's amazing." Henderson went on to collect 1,406 career stolen bases. One should never say never, but I don't expect to live to see Rickey Henderson's record broken. Even so, I am most impressed with the grace and compliment given by Lou Brock! Verbal Sunshine. A word of support along the journey.

### **II. The Grievance Continuum**

- a. For several years I worked as a consultant for urban congregations. My mentor and friend Carl Dudley often worked alongside me. As we visited congregations, we began to notice

something we called “**accumulated grievances.**” Sometimes folks in congregations would carry grumblings and complaints for years, decades. Location of the coffee pot, a memorials book that wasn’t kept up to date, too much pushing for change all the time. Many could tell you what was wrong – and few could say what was right with their congregation.

- b. In those years, there was research showing that it took seven positive comments to match or overcome the power of just one negative one. Carl and I decided we would develop a “**Grievance Continuum**” that ran from 1 to 7. We understood that it was unlikely congregations could change quickly – in fact, our goal was to help a congregation move just one or two positions away from becoming a **grievance swamp**. You see, in some congregations, what we found was a nursing home for complaints. Many couldn’t understand why others didn’t want to join their jacuzzi of grumbling... their swirlings of sadness.
- c. Carl Dudley told the story of the time he was pastor of a small Presbyterian Church in St. Louis. He said members of the church agreed they wanted to welcome others, but when new folks from the neighborhood showed up, it wasn’t a very welcoming place. It was especially unwelcoming if there were young children in worship. They would speak out, laugh or make noise while the choir was singing or during the sermon.
- d. Carl said and then the Sunday came when there were baptisms. All was made ready. Parents had attended classes, sponsors were ready. This was a Presbyterian Church after all! It was to be decent and in order. However, when it came time for the baptism a neighborhood woman and her rowdy child surprised everyone by joining the baptism. Carl continued as planned – baptisms with those prepared first, hoping the new mother would catch on. Then he began the baptism for the rowdy child. He came to the place in the service when he asked, “Who stands with this parent and child.” There was no clear sponsor. None. Silence. Carl said, “I waited. Then one person stood, then another and another. A few seconds later the entire congregation was standing with this woman and her son.” Reflecting on this years later, Carl said, “That’s the day the **congregation moved from being a “5” on the Grievance Continuum to a “3”!**
- e. [Add if time permits.] We have been preaching a series on speaking the truth in love. If you recall, early on I asked what can *be done to help people move away from thinking of themselves as victim, fatalistic, unable to apologize, fearful of failure or living in a world of confirmation bias, where what they believe is wrong is reinforced by what they read and the messages they receive from a narrow set of friends.*

### III. What happened to Elijah’s *Get Up and Go*?

- a. As I was reading the passages on Elijah, I was struck by how he represents so many. There is that powerful scene in the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of I Kings. Ahab says to Elijah, “There you are, your troubler of Israel.” Elijah has defeated the priests of Baal. You remember, on Mt. Carmel and Elijah teases the prophets of Baal – “*Cry louder, Sing Louder,*” he says.
- b. He has won! Even so there seems to be a cloud over his head all the time. Elijah, the go-getter can’t get going. His get up and go has gotten up and left? God’s recurring question to Elijah is “what are you doing here, Elijah?” He headed for the wilderness. I believe Elijah was a

depressive – perhaps a manic depressive. He is in despair, even though he has won! *Draught in touch, words and food.*

- c. Even before he heads to the wilderness, he casts himself (bows himself) on the ground, I Kings 18:42. Some interpret this as praying. It is powerful language, “he puts his head beneath (or between) his knees. I believe he is not a happy man. It is a position of sorry, grief, despair. Knowing that Ahab has told Jezebel and now for fear, he runs off to Beer-sheba over 100 miles distant. Then he goes a day’s journey into the wilderness and falls under a broom tree. He hopes to die. An angel of the Lord comes and serves him.
- d. Wilderness is a place of absence – literally the Hebrew meaning is a “wordless place.” A place of drought – Desolation, isolation – A place of no touch, no words, no food. The angel comes and we read of *a still small voice* speaking to him. Others translate it as “*a sound of sheer silence.*” Elijah does move – this time to the cave, but he still has work to do. The angel visits again - anointing Hazael as king of Aram, Jehu as king of Israel, and Elisha as his successor. Angel comes and does three gentle and available things – touch, talks (get up) and food. Gives the most basic of things.
- e. [Additional Thought outside sermon – Maya Shankar “Empowering Our Children by Bridging the Word Gap”, White House, 2014 *During the first three years of life, a poor child hears roughly 30 million fewer total words than her more affluent peers. Children who experience this drought in heard words have vocabularies that are half the size of their peers by age 3, putting them at a disadvantage before they even step foot in a classroom.*]

#### IV. Who “Angels” You?

- a. [Walter Wangerin, Jr., Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Installation of Philip Amerson as President, November 3, 2006]. Walt Wangerin [author, pastor, friend -- more] was the preacher at my installation service as president of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary. I recalled that he preached about Elijah under a broom tree on this that day.
- b. Walt spoke of his earlier pastorate in his small congregation. The lesson for a Sunday was from the epistle you heard at the beginning of the sermon, Galatians 5:14-15 <sup>14</sup> *For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* <sup>15</sup> *If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.*
- c. Walt said he knew of the sin of gossip was overwhelming that church. Arguments between altar guild and leaders of the council... and many other personal disagreements. He preached on these texts that Sunday. He got up early... paced up and down... the sermon was done but he had to put himself together. He wanted call the congregation I love to one another instead of consuming itself. He said, “I shook, I am doing the work of the Lord.” He preached but sensed he had made little impact. Grateful it was done – he had called the congregation into account. After worship, downstairs in Fellowship Hall he heard women in kitchen, “What do you think was wrong with the pastor today?” “Maybe he lost some of his chickens” [Walt had chickens he raised.], or they said, “Maybe one of his children acting up.” As Walt said, “I had put all of that sweat and labor into calling them to be more loving and thought it was me!”

- d. He said, "They put me, in the best sense, *IN MY PLACE*. I looked to the left and right knew I was under the broom tree. Remember, three things are the action of the angel of the Lord: touch, word and food.
- e. Walt and I would meet weekly in those years in his small office. We would talk of ministry, pray together and offer assurance of God's pardon. To my surprise in that installation sermon, Walt told of his sense of being like Elijah under the broom tree and then walked over to me, touched my shoulder and said, the angel for him in that time was me. It was twenty-five years later! And, I never knew it! **Who has been an angel to you? To whom have you been an angel and you never knew it?**
- f. Natalia Ginzburg, Italian novelist and essayist, makes a distinction between the little virtues (*piccole virtu*) such as **thrift, caution, neatness** - and the great virtues such as **compassion, generosity and encouragement** (see Philip Hallie, *Tales of Good and Evil, Help and Harm*, p. 40). The little virtues are to protect our hides -- this is their main function. These are practical and commonsensical virtues. HOWEVER, if this is all we give our children, all we practice, then this is **only as wide as their self-seeking skins**. The great virtues teach us not how to save our hides but more, **how to save our hearts and discover God is saving our souls**. Ginzberg argues we do not handle the crises around us well **because we have lost practice with the great virtues**.
- g. Philip Hallie speaks of "This quiet habit of efficacious compassion" found among the people of Le Chambon in France who saved the lives of some 5,000 Jews in World War II. The great virtues are the heart virtues --these are often impractical - but they are fundamental. We have come to a time in the history of this nation, when churches need to encourage folks to save our hearts and not just our hides.
- h. There is a wonderful story that comes out of Swedish folklore of a country doctor who went out to a farmhouse one night where a woman was about to give birth. As the woman labored, the doctor asked her husband to assist him by holding a gas lantern up high in order to illuminate the makeshift delivery room. Before long, the courageous mother delivered a wonderful, healthy, baby girl. Then the doctor made a surprise announcement: "A second child is due to arrive." Whereupon the mother produced a wonderful, healthy baby boy. The husband's arms were very weary from holding up the light and he was shaken by the unexpected birth of twins. You can imagine his complete astonishment when he heard the doctor say, "We're not finished yet. It looks like it's going to be triplets!" To which the stunned father, still holding the lantern aloft, replied, "It must be the light that's attracting them."
- i. It is the light – Get up and Go -- Declare how much God has done for you! It is the light that draws them! *AMEN*

### **1 Kings 19:1-4, (5-7), 8-15a**

19:1 Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. 19:2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, "So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow." 19:3 Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there. 19:4 But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: "It is enough; now, O LORD, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors." 19:5 Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, "Get up and eat." 19:6 He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. 19:7 The angel of the LORD came a second time, touched him, and said, "Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you." 19:8 He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God.

19:9 At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there. Then the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 19:10 He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." 19:11 He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; 19:12 and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. 19:13 When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" 19:14 He answered, "I have been very zealous for the LORD, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away." 19:15a Then the LORD said to him, "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus.

### **Luke 8:26-39**

8:26 Then they arrived at the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. 8:27 As he stepped out on land, a man of the city who had demons met him. For a long time he had worn no clothes, and he did not live in a house but in the tombs. 8:28 When he saw Jesus, he fell down before him and shouted at the top of his voice, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, do not torment me"-- 8:29 for Jesus had commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. (For many times it had seized him; he was kept under guard and bound with chains and shackles, but he would break the bonds and be driven by the demon into the wilds.) 8:30 Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" He said, "Legion"; for many demons had entered him. 8:31 They begged him not to order them to go back into the abyss.

8:32 Now there on the hillside a large herd of swine was feeding; and the demons begged Jesus to let them enter these. So he gave them permission. 8:33 Then the demons came out of the man and entered the swine, and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned. 8:34 When the swineherds saw what had happened, they ran off and told it in the city and in the country.

8:35 Then people came out to see what had happened, and when they came to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. 8:36 Those who had seen it told them how the one who had been possessed by demons had been healed. 8:37 Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them; for they were seized with great fear. So he got into the boat and returned.

8:38 The man from whom the demons had gone begged that he might be with him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, 8:39 "Return to your home, and declare how much God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.