

McCabe United Methodist Church

“Limping Out of Habit”

I Kings 18:20-39

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September 27, 2009

A colleague tells of his experience having knee surgery. His old football knees had been screaming at him, so this macho man went to the doctor. The doctor took one look at the strange way he was walking and sent him immediately for an MRI. They scoped the knee and the recovery time started. He tells how most days went pretty well. Some days, however, he walked too much, stood too much, or climbed too many stairs. And when that happened he found himself limping again. But here is what I want us to hear. He tells how he noticed that sometimes he would start walking and suddenly realize that he was limping when he didn't need to anymore. “I'm limping out of habit” he said. “I had limped along for so long that now, sometimes, unwittingly, I limp when I don't really need to. . .It's just an old, bad habit that is hard to break. . .’limping’ had become a part of my daily lifestyle. Now, I'm trying to learn all over again how to stand tall and walk straight.”

I am reminded of that great scene in I Kings where the great prophet Elijah says to the people, “How long will you go limping with two different opinions?” He goes on to say, “If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (18:21) Why did Elijah say that? And what is he talking about?

Here is the story. When the people of Israel came into the promised land of Canaan, they settled down beside the Canaanite people. The Israelites had been wandering in the wilderness for many years prior to this. Now they are going to try their hand at farming. Think of this, these nomads who don't know a thing about farming are about to try, and to make things worse, these rookies are going to try right in the midst of the Canaanites who have been farming forever.

So the time comes for the first harvest. You don't have to be a farmer to know who has the best crops. The Israelites go to their Canaanite neighbors and say, “We notice that your crops are much better than ours. Why is that? How did you do it?”

The Canaanites say, “Simple, we prayed to Baal! He is our local fertility god, and we pray to him, and he gives us good crops.”

Actually, Baal had nothing to do with it, but the Canaanites thought he did. So, the Israelites began to wonder and reason like this: “We know God said to us, ‘Have no other gods, and make no graven images.’ We know we are supposed to worship God alone. But we sure would like to have better crops next year. Maybe if we prayed to Baal, just a little bit. . .what could it hurt? It might even give us a better harvest. Maybe it's worth a try.”

The prophet Elijah comes along. He knows that this thinking and these actions were a violation of the Ten Commandments. He also knew that Baal worship represented superstition and immorality and idolatry, so he had to stand tall and speak out against this wrongful practice. Listen to the Scripture for today. I Kings 18:20-22.

So he challenged the 450 prophets of Baal to a contest. To determine, Who is in charge of the universe? Is it God? Or is it Baal?

Here is the contest. They piled up wood for a bonfire. Elijah then told the prophets of Baal to call on Baal to miraculously ignite the fire. For hours, the 450 prophets of Baal called out to their god, over and over, but to no avail. At this point Elijah has the nerve to chide them a little, saying, “Maybe you should cry louder. Maybe Baal has gone to sleep. Or maybe he is daydreaming right now. Or maybe he has gone on a trip. By the way, the scriptures tells us at this point that the Canaanite prophets “limped around the altar they had made” crying louder and louder, but no response. Finally, in their exhaustion they give up, there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

Now it is Elijah’s turn to call upon God. Elijah stepped forward. To make the task more difficult and more awesome, Elijah asked that the bonfire wood be doused with water—not once, not twice, but three times! Then Elijah called on God to send fire from heaven saying:

“Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so that this people may know that you O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back.”^(vs 37)

The scriptures tell what happened like this: “The fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, ‘The Lord indeed is God; the Lord indeed is God’”

In that ancient contest, the question Elijah put before the people of Israel is the same question we need to face today, namely this: “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.”^(vs21)

We at McCabe are limping along. We are in the beginning stages of a Stewardship campaign called the “Journey of Faith” for the indebtedness on our building addition. Along with this we will be receiving pledges for the 2010 General Budget - or Operating Budget. And we are behind where we have been in other years with our current year’s budget income.

I say limping along because I continue to hear the question, “How are we going to do this?” Or “There is no way we can do this.”

My friends are we looking to God or to Baal. Over and over in the material you have received there has been that question we have encouraged and asked each of us to consider: “Lord, what would you have me do?” If we are not earnestly asking that question of God, then it seems to me, we are turning to the false gods of our day. If God is really at the center of our life. If God is the one we claim to be following then it seems to me, that is where we turn for insight and direction. However, if we are unwilling or do not seriously turn to God and ask for God’s direction and guidance then how do we explain or justify our limping along if we are listening to God?

Now you may say, well that story of Elijah is just a story. Well, wether you see it as an actual event or a story. Either way, it was something that was important to the Israelites. So much so, that it has been preserved through time, since the 9th Century BC, and was something that they made sure was told to their children as a vital part of the way they would follow God.

If the Lord indeed is our God today. Then why is it we are limping along? We are a blessed people. We are like the Canaanites in our story. We are the ones who have the good crops, salaries, homes, toys. Which would suggest that we are the ones who are worshipping Baal. While God’s people, and God’s church goes on without.

I don't know about you. But I am not aware of anyplace where God has indicated that the standards of following Christ have changed from Biblical times. The Bible is still the standard for us as Christians, isn't it? If this is true, then isn't it fair to say that God calls us today just like those of the past?

That would mean that each of us is asked to share out of our means not in an equal or what is sometimes called "a fair share" amount, as this is not the way God works. The scriptures tells us that for God, to those who have much, much will be required and those who have less, less will be required. So often we think that means each of us can determine if we have much or less. But the context of the scriptures for these words and commands has Jesus being the one to judge. Thus, our request of each of us to ask, "Lord, what do you want me to do?"

Let me share with you an example that illustrates how it is that we are limping along out of habit. In Burleigh County, if you take the 2009 welfare rate for a family of four (which is \$27,564 per year) and take a **half-tithe** (\$1,378 or 5%) of that yearly amount and multiply it by 400 giving units(here at McCabe in 2008 according to the pledge numbers we had 456) we would have just short of enough offering to pay the current General Budget.

Now, let me go one step more. If we took that same welfare rate and the McCabe people would give a **tithe** (or 10%) and multiply it by 400 giving units we would have enough to cover our current General Budget AND pay our building loan for the year. AND Also, be able to pay 32 extra payments on the principal of the building loan each year.

My friends, there are many, I say many, of us here at McCabe who have yearly incomes of not just two, but three, or four, or five times that yearly welfare rate. Yet, there are only about 125 giving units whose contributions to the General Budget for the year total more than **the half-tithe** of the welfare amount.

In the words of the prophet Elijah, "*How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.*"

I know these are hard words. I know that we are all in different situations in life. But at the same time, let us believe God can work with us and help us to see where we can change. Let us be a people who will honestly ask of God, "Lord what would you have me do?"

If we are willing to honestly ask God and then listen to God and follow the answer that God gives amazing things can and will happen!

Or, if we are not able to discern God's direction, then look at what is the very best we can do. But keep in mind, that God will usually ask us for something that is sacrificial. Because God is always asking us to do and to give at a level that we can't do on our own - where we must exercise faith and trust in God.

May we as individuals and as a church be found making the claim that Joshua made: "*Serve [the Lord] in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away [false] gods. . . Choose this day whom you will serve. . . **but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.***" (Joshua 24:14-15)

What a great thing for anyone of us to say! What a great thing for McCabe church to say: God comes first here. God is the Lord of all. We will stand tall and walk straight for God!