

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
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“Back to the Concrete: Midway Spirituality”
a series on 2 Corinthians.
2 Corinthians 8:1-15; 9:6-11
September 4, 2016

For six weeks now we've been on a journey through midway spirituality... a spirituality that develops midway on the road of life's journey when you suddenly realize that you're lost in the dark wood, to use Dante's image.

That's the framework we've been using as we've worked through 2nd Corinthians, because we know that this letter is at least Paul's 4th correspondence with this church. And so, they're down the road a ways by now... past the initial highs and painful lows of faith. And now they're trying to figure out how to be God's people when you wake up one day, way down the road, and you realize

that you're not sure where you are,
how you got there,
or which way to go next.

As much as we don't like to be in this place, we began our time in the dark woods by naming the truth that this is the place where our deepest spiritual work happens. ***Because in the dark woods, you have to come to grips with the fact that you cannot find your way on your own. Your resources, your ingenuity, your determination... are no longer enough.***

And so, there is this great humbling, this new awareness of your need for grace, an awareness that goes beyond anything you have known before. And as you live into a deeper need for grace, you'll find that your pain, your woundedness might just become the very place of your greatest gift to the world.

That was our first week in these dark woods.

A week later we talked about what forgiveness looks like in this place... forgiveness that's maybe harder than we ever imagined. A forgiveness that doesn't look like forgetfulness, but looks more like an invitation to the imagination, an ***invitation to risk a future other than the one imposed on us by memory or the past.***

And as we began moving through these dark woods, imagining a different kind of future, a week later, we began to come to grips with the gift of ***our own imperfection...*** We're realizing that the aim of gospel isn't about becoming perfect and getting it right. Instead it's about Participation, about Divine Union.

You see, the gospel of Jesus offers us a ***Spirituality of Imperfection...*** It's precisely when we become cracked, broken pots that the light of God can begin to shine in us and shine through us, to fill us. And so it's in the dark woods where we learn to stop trying so hard to be perfect all the time... and to stop expecting it of everyone else as well.

It's also in these dark woods that we learn how to tend the holy fire within us...
keeping it aflame,
filling our veins with life on the one hand,
but also not letting it run wild,
tearing our lives apart on the other hand.

And we're discovering that tending this holy fire is the essence of our spiritual lives. What we do with that holy longing in our beings is our spirituality.

And as we do tend these holy fires, we're starting to find our way through the dark woods. But the way looks different than it did before, because now we're seeing the woods, and the world, and the cosmos with a different set of eyes.

We're opening up to a reality, a realm, that our life is caught up in... the realm of being **"in Christ"** as Paul describes it. And we're realizing that being **"in Christ"** was never just about our personal salvation, or about joining the **"Jesus Team."**

It's about something much larger. It's about being drawn into a presence, or an energy where all is reconciled to God's own self.

In Christ, you are being reconciled to God with all of humanity and creation itself. And as you glimpse this reality, you start seeing that ***there is a deep unity at the center of the cosmos.*** To use St. Bonaventure's words, **"Christ is the one whose center is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere."**

This has been our journey through the dark woods these last six weeks and now, with this new kind of seeing, we're finding our way back into our lives in all their particularities...

back into your life,
the responsibilities that are yours,
the commitments that are yours,
the work that is yours to do.

For six weeks we've been journeying through the dark woods, exploring midway spirituality, and as we come to our last week in 2nd Corinthians, we're coming to a very practical, concrete place.

That's the arc of any healthy spiritual journey, and it's important we understand that. It always brings us back to the practical. Our spiritual work is never about an escape from the concrete lives we're living. It's not a road away from your particular life, or away from your physical body, or away from this physical earth.

It's just the opposite. ***A healthy spiritual journey will always bring us back to the physical, to the practical, to the real concrete living of your ordinary life, with your particular relationships and responsibilities.***

And that's where Paul takes us in this letter. He does that by reminding the Corinthians about the concrete commitments they made... with their money.

You see long before this letter was written, before even 1 Corinthians was penned, Paul was in charge of fund raising for the church in Jerusalem. We don't know the details of the situation, but when you read through his various letters, you get the sense that the Church in Jerusalem was in some kind of serious trouble. They had some great need.

So, Paul reached out to his network of churches. He put together this really nice scroll artistically designed by a local artist explaining the need, and gave this effort a catchy name. And inside this scroll there was even a nice timeline of the history of the church in Jerusalem,
and a giving chart stamped in the center,
... and when you pulled the scroll out of your mail box and opened it up, a nice little black stone fell out, into your lap. [You didn't realize that our capital campaign was based off his, did you?]

Of course, tucked in there with all that was a commitment card and return envelope. And the churches from all over wanted to help. So they talked about what they could do... prayed about what God would have them do, and then they mailed in their commitment cards.

It was a very exciting time... They all felt inspired to be part of helping the church in Jerusalem in this very important moment.

But you know how it goes. Time passes. The excitement fades. Other things start grabbing for our attention. Maybe there's an unexpected bill. Maybe the Corinthians' A/C went out.

Maybe we get lost in the dark woods for a while,
Maybe we get interested in something new and different,
Maybe... we can't remember exactly why we made the commitment we made.

Time has a way of softening the edges of our commitments, doesn't it? And I'm not just talking about our giving commitments, here. It's true of all kinds of commitments. What once seemed so clear in our hearts and minds... can get harder and harder to remember as time goes by and life changes.

It might be a commitment to a new habit or practice. You're gung ho on the first of January, with your New Year's resolution.

But after awhile.... it's hard to keep going isn't it?...

In fact it may completely fade away by the time you get to...
the second of January?

Our commitments lose their centrality in our minds... sometimes in a few days... sometimes over the course of years. That might be our commitments to something we feel called to,

or our commitments we make at work,
or our commitments we make to our families,
to a specific relationship...

Month after month goes by. Years go by, and what was burning in our hearts in one season is hard to even remember in another.

Or maybe, in a moment of confusion, a moment of losing ourselves... our commitments are simply brushed aside.

It happens in all kinds of commitments we make in our lives... ***even our commitments to God.***

One day, we walked into the waters of baptism, and we are soaked in the blessing of God, giving our entire life, our entire being over to Christ. Committing ourselves to following Jesus, as best we can... always, no matter what.

But life goes on, and new questions come, don't they?
and what once seemed so certain,
or what once seemed so full hearted...
has faded... bit by bit, year after year.

And sometimes it's the fading of our commitments that leads us into the dark woods to begin with. It happens to us all along the way, and it seems like it must have happened to the Corinthians.

So, Paul spends two entire chapters reminding them about the commitment they made. Reminding them of the collection and the need... calling them back to the particular concrete work of their commitments.

And he does this in part by telling them about how others have already responded even when it was hard, even when they couldn't afford it. **"Others do this and you can too,"** he is saying to them.

"They gave what they could afford and even more than they could afford," Paul writes. In fact, **"they urgently begged us for the grace/ the privilege of sharing in this service for the saints."**

It reminds me of a story that Ben Witherington tells about his dad's church in Charlotte, North Carolina.¹ Apparently, this church used to visit church members in their homes each year, to touch base with them, to answer any questions they might have, hear any concerns they might have... and also collect their giving pledges for the upcoming year.

¹ Witherington, *Matthew*, in the Smyth and Helways Commentary Series.

One young lawyer, who was on this visiting team, was very much into the lifestyle of dressing for success. Everywhere he went, he wore high-end suits, and Gucci shoes and always drove his ragtop Beemer. One of the people he was assigned to visit was a little old lady who lived on a fixed income in a trailer on the south edge of town. In fact, the young lawyer even had a hard time finding her home.

Once he finally did he pulled into the gravel driveway, and saw the yard full of weeds, the aging trailer, and the even older car parked next to the doorway. As he got out of his own car, he knew there was no way he was going to mention the pledge card to this woman, but he certainly was going to visit with her.

When he went to the door, she was obviously waiting for him. She had made tea and cookies and they had a nice chat about their church. As he got up to leave, she said, "Wait here sonny, I want to go get my pledge off the refrigerator."

The young lawyer felt very awkward in this moment. **"That's alright ma'am, we understand you live on a fixed income, and..."** But before he could finish, she marched out of her kitchen, pledge in hand, walked right up to the much taller man, grabbed him by the lapels, pulled him down, looked him straight in the eyes, said, **"Don't you dare take away my privilege of sharing in the ministry of Jesus,"** and handed him her pledge card.

She was just like the other churches Paul is writing about. **"Don't you take away our privilege of sharing in this ministry..."**

Paul tells all this to the Corinthians as he reminds them about the commitments they once made, *because sometimes we need a little perspective.*

"Finish the job," he writes to them, and do it in such a way **"that you finish it with as much enthusiasm as you started, giving what you can afford,"** he says halfway through Chapter 8.

And by the middle of Chapter 9 he coins those famous words we've heard so many times, **"Everyone should give whatever they have decided in their heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."**

Now when it comes to the topic of money, I think this is another one of those breakthrough moments in scriptures, which is why we hear it so often. It's a culmination moment... the culmination of *the narrative of giving* that stretches all the way back through the entire bible...

all the way back to Adam and Eve's sons, Cain and Able,
one who gave in a way that honored God,
and one who's giving did not honor God.

And the story of giving went on, to Abraham, who gave a tithe, one tenth of all he had, to Melkisedeck, the priest of the Most High God. And this then becomes the paradigm for Abraham's descendants. So as we move through the Old Testament, there is

an expectation, a law, that the people of God tithe, that they give one-tenth of their possessions, to honor God.

But then as we move into the New Testament, we hear Jesus talking about our money in a deeper way, not rejecting the tithe, but certainly transcending it as a “rule.” Again and again Jesus describes the power that money can have over us, and the dangers of greed and the importance of generosity. Jesus moves the conversation past a legal code, to a deeper reality... one that describes the relationship of money to our souls.

So by the time Paul comes around, and is writing this letter to the Corinthians he’s putting it all together. He’s helping us to see that the concrete practice of giving, and giving sacrificially, still matters, but the spirit in which one gives is what is central. ***Because for Paul, giving is first and foremost about our spiritual formation.***

Giving is one of those key concrete actions that shapes our spiritual lives.
So the more we are able to give in joy, to give with cheerful hearts,
the more our souls are healed,
and our hearts filled,
and our lives filled with an abundance of God’s life.

“So, no don’t give reluctantly, or with hesitation, or under pressure,” Paul says to us all. **“But yes, give! And give cheerfully... what you decided to give.”**

Because, here’s the thing,
***the concrete living of your commitments,
the doing of your faith with a cheerful heart
matters to your soul.***

So, as we draw this series on midway spirituality to a close, as we make our way out of the woods and into the living of our lives, let me challenge you to be faithful, and full hearted in your commitments... whatever they may be.

Yes to your giving, but to so much more.

Be full hearted, and cheerful as you give yourself to all the commitments you’ve made in your life...

to your families,
to your relationships,
to your God.

Live them out with cheerful hearts.

When you come to those moments, those seasons... when you can’t remember why you made those commitments to begin with, or when you’re not sure how to give with joy, then remember this, ***there is One who has given himself fully for you.***

It's why we return to this table again and again... to be fed and nourished, in body and soul... By coming to this table, we remember again and again the commitment Christ made to loving us, even when it cost everything.

*You see, it was on the night he was betrayed
Jesus took the break, broke it and said....*