

Exodus 17:1-7, Mt. 21:23-32  
September 25, 2011

South Plains

### Stages on the Journey

Today we elect some new elders. Often when Presbyterians are approached about serving the church as officers, they will demur by saying they're not good enough, or else they say that others would be better. At least according to this parable, Jesus might agree with that assessment. His parable is meant to encourage even the worst of us, and at the same time to humble even the best of us. Especially in Matthew's gospel, Jesus has a special affinity for tax collectors who, he says, will go into the kingdom of heaven along with prostitutes ahead of elders. Several times Jesus holds this group up as an example of sinners who are quicker to please God than more religious people. Every year when we elect elders and other leaders for South Plains, the congregational meeting furnishes us with a pause in the routine, a moment for re-evaluation. We pause to ask ourselves two questions: Where are we on our journey as the people of God? And, who do we want to lead us?

Those are the same familiar questions that Israel asked herself as she journeyed through the wilderness. The answer to the second question while they were in the wilderness was always the same: Moses is God's appointed leader. But, the first question was more problematic. It's what children want to know on a long

automobile ride: "Where are we now? How much longer? (and of course) I'm thirsty." Of course, as soon as the parents provide something to drink, that leads to other complaints and questions. That is exactly what happens to Israel traveling through the wilderness. Chapter seventeen of the book of Exodus is only a single illustration of the many problems during the journey.

South Plains is on a journey. We're not moving geographically, but we are on the move in terms of our ministry. Our numbers have increased and Kirk Hall has increased the possibilities for serving Jesus Christ. One way to think about the stages on our journey is sociologically. Not too long ago we were a family sized church. Everybody knew everybody else. In this stage we were like Abraham's tribe, so close we seemed like kinfolk. In the last 15 years, we transitioned to become a pastoral sized church where everybody knew the pastor. Some of us even know everyone in the church. In my mind, this is comparable to Israel's history with kings. Everybody knew the king. The third stage in a congregation's life can be called a program sized church where the church is recognized by its programs. A few people would know most everybody. Most people would have some relationship with the pastor. But, much of church life would revolve around programs such as Bible studies, Sunday School, youth ministry, women's groups, mission outreach and the like. More people are served this way, and the stability of the congregation is greater. Our journey in South Plains is somewhere between a pastoral sized church and a program sized church.

My point is that as Christians we believe changes in the church do not just happen willy-nilly. We believe God is leading us as surely as God led the children of Israel through the wilderness. Exodus says they traveled as the Lord commanded. Now, here's the hard part. If it's true that God leads us just as God led Israel, we can expect the stages on our journey to encounter some rough spots just as Israel's journey hit some bumps in the road. The story of Israel's 40 year trek toward the Promised Land is the old story of the people of God in every century. We move in stages. Someone has said we live our life looking forward, but we understand our life looking backward as we see where God has taken us. Let's look back at the slice of life described in Exodus 17 and then we'll return to Jesus' parable of the two sons, and his application to those of us called to be leaders among the people of God

Exodus 17, verse one says "the whole congregation of Israel journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink." This is the classic problem of taking children on a trip, the travelers are thirsty. They quarrel with Moses: Why did you bring us out here to die of thirst? Moses in turn complains to the Lord who provides water for God's people.

It's worth looking at how God provides water. He tells Moses, the leader, to strike a certain rock with his staff. Moses did as he was told and water gushed from the broken rock, enough water to slake the thirst of the

whole company. Geologists tell us that in that part of the world, it is quite possible that an aquifer could be uncovered by breaking the limestone rock on the surface. God directs Moses to use the natural resources of the created world in order to solve a crisis. The miracle is not water from nowhere, but water from where the Creator had put water. Over and over, the people of Israel face a crisis and they cry to the Lord for help, often with bitter cries of complaint. Over and over, the Lord directs them to the relief they need.

The journey from Egypt is a series of miracles as God listens to his people's complaints and responds to their challenges along the journey. The complaints vary as the journey continues and the challenges change, but there is a constant all along the way. The constant is a requirement that Moses and the people listen to the Lord and obey the Lord's directions. Our journey as a congregation is changing. The challenges today are different from the challenges of yesterday. A couple of generations ago, South Plains was a neighborhood church. Most of our members had family ties to the Keswick neighborhood. Today, members come from half a dozen different neighborhoods, or more.

One of our blessings has been a minimum of complaints. The constant, however, is the same requirement to listen to what the Lord is saying through scripture and prayer, and to obey the Lord's directions. That's what God requires of us.

Now back to the parable of Jesus. The chief priests and the elders have been trying to trap Jesus with a question about authority. The sub-text of their question about John the Baptist is a challenge to Jesus' authority. When they fail to snare Jesus, he tells them a parable. A man had two sons. He goes to the first and tells him to go to work. But the first son is rebellious and refuses. Later, he changes his mind and does, in fact, go to work. Then, the father goes to the second son with the same demand, "Go to work." The second son says, "Sure, Dad, I'm on my way." But, he does not go. Jesus' question is which of the two did the will of his father? Even those dense priests and elders know the answer. The obedient son is the son who actually does what the father said.

Jesus has turned the tables and trapped the religious establishment. The tax collectors and prostitutes knew the commandments, but they had been rebelling against God most of their lives. But, when John came preaching the righteousness of the kingdom of God, they changed their minds. The priests and elders spent their lives telling the world they were obedient to God. They were the so-called good people. But when John came preaching righteousness, they did not believe him. They did not accept the righteousness of the kingdom of God. Those who had seemed the 'good people' were disobedient, trailing far behind the tax collectors and prostitutes whom God honored.

Today we elect elders, a trustee and a member of the nominating committee for new terms of office. We have good nominees. They are not just so-called good people; they have given evidence of being genuine followers of Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, we have benefitted from a host of outstanding elders and leaders over the years at South Plains.

This is a troubling parable for anyone who has a good reputation in the church, for anyone who has tried to do the right thing and obey the commandments, for every person just trying to keep his or her nose clean. It's troubling because yesterday's good intentions are not enough. Each day, each stage of our journey brings new challenges to the church. We can expect to have doubts as we encounter problems. However, we can always expect God to provide. The Creator of this world has put the resources we need in place. Our elected leaders will probably have to do more than strike the ground with a staff, but when we listen to the directions provided in scripture, cry to the Lord for help, and pay attention in prayer, we can expect the Lord to provide the resources we need for every challenge.