

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Five Part Story: We Wander Far from God
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Genesis 3:8-13; John 8:1-11

Our training was pretty much the same though we joined the Peace Corps 32 years apart. I joined the Peace Corp in 1977 and my daughter joined in 2009. We had language school six days a week, eight hours a day. We were given cultural sensitivity training so that we knew how to dress and act in ways that would not offend our host country citizens. We were given lessons about and exposed to local foods so that nothing would surprise us...that one did not work. All of this was the same old, same old...except my daughter received one extra unexpected bit of instruction and that was uxo training; uxo standing for unexploded ordinance. They were given this training because in Cambodia where she had gone there are somewhere between four and six million live landmines and unexploded ordinance. This is how she explained it to me. *The training was pretty basic: don't walk across fallow fields with no cattle or people walking on them. Don't go down paths or roads that look abandoned, if you see a mine or a uxo (unexplored ordinance), call the trainers organization and tell someone in the village. Keep kids away from uxos and don't let them touch them. Ask the elders in the village you are moving to about land mines and where not to go. Always obey signs that say keep away (not that there were too many of those- it was mostly just word of mouth where the mines were).* I have to say that this is not what most Peace Corps parents wanted to hear about.

I tell you that story this morning because I want you to lock that image into your brains; the image that to be safe you keep to the paths that people know are free of uxos. I ask you to do that because it will help us understand the second part of the Five Part Story, We Wander Far from God. One of the most often used images for what it means to be faithful in the scriptures is the image of following God, meaning to walk in the paths that God has established. These paths are those that lead to life giving ways and away from death dealing ways. They are the paths that keep us safe from the "landmines" that are scattered about us in the world that would diminish our humanity. The paths, the safe paths, are defined in the Old Testament by the Torah, or the Law of Moses and in the New Testament by the life and teachings of Jesus. They could be summed up as love God and neighbor. Granted, there is no guarantee that if people follow these paths they will have perfectly pain free lives but following these paths will allow folks to find the life, love and joy that God desires them to have. Unfortunately, as human beings, we have a nasty tendency to go down other paths, paths that look enticing but are filled with a variety of uxos, waiting to be tripped. We can see this in both of our stories this morning.

Our Genesis story picks up after the "don't eat that fruit" incident when Adam and Eve decided that they didn't need to listen to God's warning about the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. They knew better but they still ate. Then the uxos began to explode. There was the uxo of fear. There was the uxo of shame. There was the uxo of blame. The same is true for our Jesus story out of the Gospel of John. In this story there is a group of people who are out to get Jesus. They are trying to trap him. They decide they can do this by catching a woman in the act of committing adultery and bring her before Jesus to see what he would do. If he condemned her, they could call him a rigid legalist. If he let her go, they could say he did not love the law. Both the woman and those who were trying to use her to trap Jesus had wandered off the path and into a minefield. The woman, by breaking her marriage vows, had blown up her marriage and her reputation. The people trying to trap Jesus had become those who violate the Torah's command to love neighbor, by using her as a thing, rather than treating her as a human being. In the end of the story as they all slink away, we can see that they understood that they had stepped on uxos as well.

It would be nice to believe that humanity has learned how to stay on the path of loving God and neighbor and to avoid uxos over the past two-thousand years. Unfortunately, it would seem as if this wandering off the path is somehow hard-wired in us and in our cultures. This reality occurred to me as I was looking back over last week's sermon about God Loves the World, in which I mentioned the four ways that we know God loves us. God gives us creation,

community, leisure and love...and yes for those of you who were here last week, I changed the third on to leisure...sounds a bit better than couch. As I thought about those four ways of receiving God's love, I realized that rather than allowing that love to keep us on the path, we have taken those gifts for granted and used them for our own ends, leading us to wander into fields of uxos that have harmed us and harmed humanity. Let's do a quick review.

God loved us and gave us this amazing creation which has the ability to sustain us with air, water and food. As human beings we have clear cut and burned off the forests that provide us with oxygen. We have polluted the air and the water. We are in the midst of epic global warming, that is melting glaciers, increasing world temperatures and raising sea levels. We have not treated our God's creation as we should and so we stepped on the uxos of floods, rising sea levels, asthma, inedible fish because of mercury poisoning...and I could on and on.

God loved us and gave us community in which we might find care and support. Instead of offering our support to others, especially those who are not exactly like us, we became tribal. My tribe is better than your tribe. My tribe is superior to your tribe. My tribe can conquer and enslave your tribe. In becoming tribal we stepped on the uxos of division, racism, sexism, homophobia, war and violence.

God loves us and gave us leisure because God did not want us working ourselves to death. Biblically this is called sabbath. Yet we Americans anyway, have found a way of ignoring sabbath and working ourselves into the ground. The Japanese have a word for working oneself to death. It is Karoshi. Unfortunately we don't have such a word even though we work more hours than the Japanese. When we work this hard, we step on the uxos of depression, burn-out, shortened life spans and ill health.

God loves us and gives us love. God pours God's love into us that we might love God and neighbor. Yet we have kept this love for ourselves, or at best only offered it as a friends-and-family plan. And when we have done this, we have stepped on the uxos of unforgiveness, isolation, anger, hatred and so many more.

In one way or another we all wander off these paths and into the uxo fields that lead us and the world away from the life, love and peace God offers. I say this not to shame us, but to remind us that wandering is part of the human condition. It is what we do. But I don't want you to go away feeling depressed. And you shouldn't for two reasons. First you shouldn't feel depressed because wandering far from God is the second part of the Five Part Story. The first part is God Loves the World, meaning the foundation for our faith and life is always that God loves us. The second reason we should not go away depressed is that We Wander Far From God, is only the second part of the Five Part Story. What this means is that we have three more parts, each one focused on getting us back on God's path...each one focused on how God's love refuses to let us wander forever and offers us forgiveness and new life on each and every day.

My challenge to you this morning then is to have you take out your super-sticky note...then ask yourself, in which of the ways we wander far from God, do I need to be more self-aware of not doing so well? Do I need to care more for creation, do I need to be less tribal, do I need to practice more self-care or do I need to allow God to love me more so I can love others more? Once you have decided, write that down, take the sticky note home, and put it next to your note from last week...then remember God's love for you, and practice staying on the path in an intentional way.