

**IT'S ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS
IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED
GENESIS 9:1-17
FEBRUARY 21, 2021
FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT**

Who would like to be wise?

I'm talking about wisdom, not knowledge.

It is possible to be quite knowledgeable, but not wise.

We've all known someone who was incredibly intelligent,
maybe carried a ton of book learning,
perhaps even genius level,
but you wonder how they are able to tie their shoes in the morning.

Knowledge is about having access to certain data, knowing things.

Wisdom is about what you DO with that knowledge.

Wisdom allows you to do the RIGHT thing with the knowledge you have.

Would you like to be wise?

Some wisdom can be found in proverbs.

And not just the biblical book of Proverbs.

Our culture is punctuated with proverbs, common sense sayings.

You know them.

I'll start them, and you finish these:

Absence makes the heart...	grow fonder.
Birds of a feather...	flock together.
A picture is worth....	a thousand words.
A bird in the hand is worth...	two in the bush.
If you can't say something nice, don't.... say anything at all.	
A chain is only as strong as...	its weakest link.
All good things must....	come to an end.
A fool and his money are....	soon parted.
A journey of a thousand miles begins... with a single step.	
A leopard can't change...	its spots.
All that glitters is...	not gold.
If at first you don't succeed,... try, try again.	

Every one of those proverbs communicates a nugget of wisdom.

Today we're going to read a story from the Bible that illustrates that last proverb.

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.

God's first work of creation resulted in broken relationships.

In Genesis 1-2 God is creating,

the pinnacle of creation human beings who are made in the image of the Creator,
that is, as beings with a capacity for relationships
and for joining him in his work in the world.

But we turn the page, and in chapter 3 the wheels come off the wagon.

We know the story of

the serpent bringing temptation into the garden,
the man and woman distrusting God's motives,
breaking the one and only prohibition God placed on them,
and eating the forbidden fruit

There was a ripple effect,

from their broken relationship with God to
their relationships with themselves to

their relationship with each other and
their relationship to the creation itself.

But wait! There's more!

In chapter four Cain kills his brother Abel,
and becomes an outcast,
forever fearful that someone would do to him what he had done to his brother.

Things were quickly spiraling out of control.

It went downhill so far that it says this in Genesis 6:

GENESIS 6:5-8

God was sorry he had made human beings on the earth,

And it grieved him to his heart.

Wow.

This was NOT what God had in mind,
so now he was going to undo what he had done.

Have you ever done something that you really cared about,
and things didn't turn out well,
and you felt sick at heart?

An important purchase that
wasn't what you thought it was.

The job change that was supposed to make all the difference,
except it didn't.

The relationship you invested so much into,
but your commitment did not pay off.

And you felt sick at heart, just defeated.

God was sick at heart about what humanity had become,
the evil they had done.

From there we get the story of Noah's ark.

Before the flood came, God made sure Noah, his family, and representatives of all the animals
were safely on board the ark.

So he's got the raw material with which to start over.

There were 40 days and 40 nights of rain,
and springs gushing up more water from below,
and the flood wiped out all other life on the earth.

The horror of the death and destruction is skipped over by the text of Scripture,
but is surely in the mind of the reader.

An often missed aspect of the flood is that, in this act, God is un-creating.

When God created,

on the second day he separated the waters above from the waters below. (Ge.2:6-7)

He was creating a safe place in between where life could exist and flourish.

In the flood, it rained for 40 days, AND waters gushed up from below.

Sort of like the water main break in front of our house this morning!

It was an undoing of creation.

And the safe place for life was now restricted to the ark.

He's erasing the board, so he can start again.

It rained for 40 days and nights.

But it was a year before the flood waters receded enough they could come out on dry land.

And God would try again, with a new creation.

GENESIS 9:1-3

First thing out of the box, God gives Noah and his sons

the same command he gave the first man and woman in the garden,

"Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth."

He's starting over.

If at first you don't succeed... try, try again.

So he's trying again,

trying to build a world where healthy relationships can flourish.

Notice, too, this is where God first gives humans meat to eat.

It's no longer just the fruit of the garden, but now meat as well.

It's a new creation, and a little bit different.

And those of us who are carnivores say, "Vive la difference!"

This meat eating thing would entail the shedding of blood.

So God then puts up a guardrail around that.

GENESIS 9:4-6

Human life is elevated above that of animal life.

While animals are created by God,

and therefore valuable and to be respected,

it's not the same thing as human life.

Humans are created in the image of God,

with a special place in the created order,

with a special capacity for relationships with each other and with God,

and equipped to partner with God in tending his creation.

Taking a human life would be the ultimate crime,

and so God places on it the ultimate punishment.

The very real practical difficulties involved in the death penalty

is a topic for a different discussion.

The main point here is that God elevates the value of human life to the highest level.

Humans are uniquely treasured among all God's creatures.

So God makes a very serious move here to protect human life.

GENESIS 9:7

God gives the same command he gave to the first man and woman,

repeating what he said in verse 1.

As if to make sure they don't miss it.

Then God turns to establishing a covenant, a relationship, with all of creation.

GENESIS 9:8-17

This covenant is unique among biblical covenants.

It is not a covenant with a particular people,

nor even with human beings alone.

It is a covenant with the entire creation.

It is a unilateral covenant,

where God makes the only promises,

no demands or requirements are put on the other party,

and God willingly binds and restricts himself.

Finally, it is a covenant that includes a visual reminder in the "natural" world, the rainbow.

When clouds roll in, when there's a rainstorm,

rather than fearing another destructive and deadly flood,

we see the rainbow and can give a sigh of relief.

God has set his bow in the clouds.

The Old Testament Hebrew word for "bow" can mean bow like a rainbow,

AND it can mean bow as in bow and arrow.

Just like our English word "bow."

God has set his bow, his weapon of war, in the clouds.

He has hung it up.

He will not again make war on his entire creation by sending a flood.

If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.

God was starting again with a new creation.

Sadly, this second start ended up in a mess of sin,
just like the first creation.

But God kept trying, all to pursue a relationship with people created in his image.

He chose Abraham and Sarah from all humanity,
then Isaac and Jacob, to carry the covenant.

He raised up Moses to liberate them from slavery to the Egyptian empire and bind them to him.

He called forth judges and kings to lead them closer to him,
and prophets to bring correction and/or hope as it was needed.

Then came the biggest step yet.

God took on flesh and came into the world.

He called together a team of friends,
and touched the lives of many with his teaching and healing.

Opposition arose from the religious authorities.

They were more about rules than relationships,
and Jesus represented a major challenge to that.

They conspired with the Romans and had Jesus executed,
a slow and painful death on a cross.

But even there Jesus was in pursuit of relationship,
praying from the cross for those who had
driven the nails through his hands and feet,
“Father, forgive them.”

All the way to the end,
despite suspicion, skepticism, rejection, and execution,
he was seeking relationships.
If at first you don't succeed.... try, try again.

And then....

Easter.

Resurrection.

A reminder of where we are headed during this season of Lent.

And he was back at it, appearing to his little band of friends,
forgiving those who, in critical moments,
had abandoned him and even denied knowing him.

And then he showed himself to others,
even a crowd of 500 at some point,
expanding his circle of friends.

(1Cor.15:6)

And then he sent his Spirit to his friends,
giving birth to the church.

And he gave the church one primary job:
to be his witnesses in the world.
It would be how others could come to be friends of Jesus.

He made the church to be the body of Christ
filled with the Spirit of Christ
continuing the work of Christ in the world.

So we, the church, have been tasked to keep expanding his circle of friends.

He is pursuing relationships today.

God seeks relationship.

He seeks new relationships with those who do not yet believe.

And he seeks out the deepening of existing relationships with believers.

Wherever you are on your spiritual journey,
nonbeliever, sort of believer, or growing into spiritual maturity,
God wants YOU.

There's always a way to get closer,
 and that's what he wants with you.
 How will you respond to that?
 However you respond... he's not giving up on you.

He was raised in the church, and it wasn't a bad experience.
 God was reaching out to him through Bible stories,
 through the words of hymns, through stories of answers to prayer.
 He was OK with church, because his friends were there.
 But for him it wasn't really about a relationship with Christ.
 It was relationships with his buddies.
 And that cute girl was a draw, too.

Once he was out of his parents' house, church was no longer on his radar.
 He did a stint in the military,
 mostly because it would help him with college.
 There was the chaplain, who seemed to be a nice guy.
 But...
 God kept reaching out,
 but it always seemed like seeds falling on hard ground.

Then there were college classes that reinforced a worldview that omitted God,
 new friends, a new girl, a part time job.
 God reached out to him through the campus minister,
 through a friend who invited him to go to a concert by a Christian artist,
 even through answering the rare prayer that was lifted up during a rough spot.
 But he already had plenty to be busy with,
 so it was easy to drop church and God completely.
 Except, of course, when he needed help in a rough spot.

And then it was landing a job,
 finding an apartment in a decent location,
 working hard at the office to prove himself,
 laying the foundations of a new phase of an adult life.
 There were a couple of church buildings near his apartment,
 an occasional special church event that sounded intriguing,
 a flyer in the mail inviting him.
 But... well, you know how it is.
 A busy schedule, a date on Saturday night, a weekend trip, or just sleeping in.

He finally found THE woman,
 the one with whom he wanted to spend the rest of his life.
 She insisted on a church wedding.
 Everyone in her family had been married in a church,
 and she wanted the same.
 And... she even spoke of wanting God's blessing.
 So they did the premarital counseling with the pastor.
 It was OK.
 And the ceremony was beautiful.
 But he would not be back in those doors.
 Not until his first child was born.
 When he first held that baby,
 he had tears in his eyes and his heart swelled with gratitude.
 Except it had been so long since he even considered God,
 he didn't even think of giving voice to his gratitude to God.

The years moved on.
 The family grew by two more children, there were a few job changes,

and so many times when God extended grace and love.
 A book, a word spoken by a friend, a movie theme,
 his wife reading a book about Jesus,
 one of his kids attending worship with a friend.
 God was reaching out, over and over, waiting,
 but no response.

Yet, God kept up the effort,
 hanging out one rainbow after another.
 If at first you don't succeed... try, try, again.
 Then came the heart attack.

EMS, hospitalization, surgery.
 It was touch and go for awhile.
 And during those dark days,
 he found himself thinking beyond right here and now,
 pondering what's was beyond,
 and what will I experience if I die?
 For the first time in decades, he seriously pondered...
 God.... Jesus.... heaven and hell.

And in walked the hospital chaplain,
 with a cross on her lapel and a Bible in her hand.
 God was reaching out to him yet again.
 And this time.... He answered.

If at first you don't succeed.... try, try again.
 We sing a song that says,
 "Your love never fails, it never gives up, it never runs out on me."
 That's what this is all about.

His love is never withdrawn.
 As long as a person has breath in their lungs...
 God does not give up on anyone.
 He does not quit.
 He keeps hanging out rainbows.
 God keeps reaching out for a relationship.
 If at first you don't succeed... try, try again.
 If you've not yet given your life to Christ....
 He has not given up on you.
 Why not answer his call?
 And if you have given your life to him....
 He wants to be closer.
 Why not take that next step?