



January 23, 2011
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Move to Love: The God Who Moves Toward Us Genesis 3; John 3:16

We're going to have two scripture readings this morning. Each is about God's move toward us in love. The first move to love took place in the Garden of Eden when God went to find Adam and Eve who were hiding from him after their sin and rebellion. The second move love took place in Bethlehem when the Son of God left heaven and came to earth to rescue us and all humanity from our sin and rebellion against God and God's love. (Read the two passages)

Genesis chapter 3 is one of the most important stories in the entire Bible. It's about Adam and Eve, the first humans—but it's also absolutely for sure about you and me and everyone who ever lived. It answers some of the biggest questions there are, including these two: "Who are we and what were we made for?" and, "What's *wrong* with the world, what's wrong with everyone else; and what's wrong with *me* and the people I love and count on?"

You probably know the story, but let's walk through it together. God created Adam and Eve, and before they sinned, things were just the way God meant them to be. They were naked and unashamed. Not embarrassed to be naked in front of each other—they were not ashamed of their bodies and the implication is that they had nothing at all they needed to hide from each other or God or anyone else, either. No one was keeping any secrets from anyone else, everything was right out in the open, and it was all good; in fact, it was all just what God had in mind. They had everything God intended them to have: they had a relationship with him, they had each other, they had a great place to live that had been designed with them in mind (the Garden of Eden), they had work to do (take care of the garden), and all of the rest of creation was blessed with them in it. Here is a key message in this story: we were made for relationship: with God, with each other, with the rest of creation. We are not complete without others because God made us for relationships.

Now we get to the part of the story that tells us what went wrong then—and what's *still* wrong around here and everywhere; in me, in you, in everyone I love and everyone I don't know or care about, too. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil apparently was a pretty good looking tree, with fruit that looked great to eat. Now, an important question is this: whose tree was it? For whom was it made? For Adam and Eve? No, it wasn't their tree, it was God's. God the Creator is in the business of knowing what's good and what's evil. So: what business were God's creatures Adam and Eve in? They were in the loving and trusting God business; in the business of

letting God decide about what is good and evil, what gives life and what wrecks it, what brings people together and what pushes them apart. And what went wrong was that Adam and Eve decided that *they* wanted to be the ones who decided what was good and evil, or at least to cut themselves into that along with God. So, as we all know, Eve ate it first, and then Adam joined her without one word about whether it was a good idea or a deadly one.

At this point, all of our hearts should break—for God who made the world and humanity in love, for Adam and Eve, for all the world, and for everyone who would follow in the footsteps of the first couple and make the same tragic decision about wanting God's job instead of just loving and trusting him about what's good and evil. Here in the story we should all pause and weep—for the Son of God who came to earth, and suffered and died on the cross and was raised from the dead to rescue us and all of creation because we wouldn't love God and trust him and live his way in his world.

Let's look at the consequences of not loving and trusting God—of doing things our way instead of his. Adam and Eve gained some knowledge all right—they suddenly *knew* something they had never needed to know before: they were naked. And, it's not like they said, "Wow, look at that, we don't have any clothes on! How cool is *that*?" No, they saw that they were naked and they were ashamed. Suddenly what God had made for them wasn't good and normal, but frightening and shameful; suddenly they had something to hide. So, they hid from each other behind fig leaves. Now there will always be something to hide from each other, secrets to keep, and now their relationship is wounded in a way it will never recover from. And, it isn't just each other they want to hide from—they also hid from God because they were naked and ashamed that they had not trusted, not loved, not obeyed. Think about this, please: every relationship that God made for them was damaged: their relationship to God, to each other, to the rest of creation, and even their relationship to their own selves: each of them knows "I am someone who cannot be trusted to follow even on rule, to respect even one healthy boundary given in love; who in their right mind will ever trust me again—I don't even trust myself."

Listen: *that's* what's wrong around here. It's what's wrong in me and you, and in our families, our marriages, our courtships our friendships our churches and everything about the world and the way it works. We were made for relationship, for community—with God, others ourselves—but we have a propensity to destroy relationships—to create distance instead of intimacy, shame instead of love and trust. And some of us *run* from relationships—we tend to run away from love—even with the people we love the most. Listen: sin makes us *alone*, and there is nothing but sorrow and loss in that.

Now, what will God do? With all the heartbreak, all the loss, all the damage done, who would blame God if he said, "Well, now you've torn it. You've damaged everything—absolutely everything. And, nothing will stop the brokenness you have set in motion, or the hurt, and the ruination of love and relationship—forever to come, people will be affected by what you've done, and every one of them will do the exact same thing you

have done (Romans 2: 23: for all have sinned). So, I'm done with you—the whole lot of you. Good luck living in the world as you have made it. I'm outta here."

But, as we know, that is not what God did. After Adam and Eve sinned, after they hid themselves in shame, God went and found them. God moved toward love. "Adam, Adam, where are you?" God called out in the Garden. It's not that God didn't know where they were. Please. But God knew that *they* didn't know where they were any longer, they didn't even know *who* they were, any more. He moved toward them in love—and that would mean discipline and judgment, and praise God, it would mean grace and hope.

And a great question that hangs in the air is this: Will they love God back? There is no guarantee about that, is there? God moves toward them in love whether they will respond in love or not. God has moved toward you and me in love, no matter whether we receive it or reject it, whether we are grateful and blown away that he has come to save us or whether they just don't give a rip. God moves toward us in love, knowing with absolute certainty that it means his suffering will increase, knowing full well that we'll just do it to him and to each other again . . . and again. He moves toward us in love. Thank you, thank you, God.

And that is what Christmas is all about: God moves towards the whole world in love, whether we ever love him back or not. Whether we worship him and receive what he wants to give us or whether we reject him and drive the nails in his hands and bury him and hope he'll just go away and stay dead and let us live our own way as long as we can stand it. No matter whether it means joy or suffering, God in Christ has moved towards us in love. Thank you, Lord Jesus. Please send your Spirit to help us love your back and to live your way.

Listen, there is no relationship without suffering. And no forgiveness without suffering on the part of the forgiver. There is no re-relationship without paying the price of suffering. No marriages are ever saved without a cost of risk and suffering, and sometimes the whole family must pay the price for a marriage to be saved: husband and wife, the children, grandparents, brothers and sisters and dear friends. When we suffer to restore relationship, we are sharing in Jesus' suffering for the salvation of the world, we are being part of what he is doing now to bring us together.

So, here's the plea: Move toward others in love—do it because it's what God has done for you, do it because it brings life out of death by God's grace. Sometimes that will mean moving toward someone in love that has wounded us deeply, someone who has earned punishment instead of forgiveness, anger instead of grace. Let's be clear: fleeing from relationship is to choose death.

This past Thursday I received an email from Sharon Wheeler in response to the workshop Carolyn and I did on communication for Couples' Life Plus last Wednesday. Now, in order to appreciate this, you need to know that Sharon and Ken are a retired professional couple who about decade older than I am, and I'm 64. Their marriage is intimate, filled with Christ, playful and happy. Here's what Sharon had to say. "We (Ken and I) laugh because we really don't have communication problems, EXCEPT

that we both forget so many things! For example, I marched into the living room the other night posed like I was about to make a speech, and Ken looked up from his paper and was ready to listen. And I completely forgot what my topic was, and immediately went into gales of laughter. You really have to laugh a lot as you age. And, (last Wednesday evening during an exercise on listening to each other) when it was Ken's turn to tell me what I had told him, he forgot already! (When you asked us to tell each other what we would like to receive) I couldn't even think of one thing I need for him to do or to give me except for a million dollars so I could give it away. I am blessed. Sharon."

Now, how do you think Sharon and Ken arrived in their senior years being so full of love and joy in each other? The answer is this: they've been moving toward relationship with God and each other since before lots of us were born. You may be tempted to blow all this off because they are old and you are young, but here's the deal: what you are doing today is shaping your future. Do you want to wind up loving others the way Ken and Sharon do? Then, unless you plan to die young, you'd better learn to move toward love now, or you'll be a lonely old man or woman instead of a joyful, playful, Christlike and SKILLFUL older couple like them. Do it with Christian friends even if you aren't married and don't plan to be; do it even if your spouse died before you; do it if you are divorced. Do it with a handful of friends—teenagers, find some friends and move toward them in love. Do it even if it's scary, even if it's risky. Even if you've been wronged. Even if you don't really know how to, yet, but will have to learn some new things. Do it even if others think you'd be a sucker to move toward love instead of walking away. Do it even though there is no guarantee that you'll be loved back, even if it involves some suffering for you. It's what God has done for you, and it's what Jesus asks—commands—us to do: "A new command I give you, that you love one another as I have loved you." Anything else is death. Honest.

That doesn't mean rolling over and putting up with rotten behavior, or with habits and hang-ups. That is NOT Jesus' way, ever! It does mean investing now in relationships and working to behave in a Christly, healthy, loving and faithful way: first with family, then with other Christians and then with others in the world.

Figure out what moving toward love means for you. Then, gather your resources. Turn to God for help and clarity. You almost certainly have some friends and family members who know how to move toward love, and are seeking to live Jesus' way in Jesus' world. Chapel Hill Pres is *full* of resources for moving toward love. Celebrate Recovery and Life Hurts God Heals for hurts, hang-ups and habits—and for help dealing with loved ones who have them, too. Life Groups—we'll have a sign-up for new groups the first Sunday in February. TLC on Tuesday mornings for women. Mothers of Preschoolers on Mondays. Men's Breakfast. A mission trip. And, if you need some serious help about relationships, if you can't form them or are in a really troubled one, please: go see a counselor or a professional therapist—exactly as you would get help from a physician if you had pneumonia—you can afford it: it's way cheaper than a divorce and lots less painful. And, as Pastors Mark and Jeremy like to say, we worship at Chapel Hill with astonishing regularity: be in worship, bow your life and lay your relationships before God every Sunday.

Let's go to the Lord's table, now and receive what God longs to give us in the Only Son.

Sermon Questions

Read Genesis 2: 18 through 3: 19. This is a very rich and deep story, but this week, please focus on Genesis 3: 6-13 for your reflection time. Read 3: 6-13 again, and do the Word Life process:

Individually

Reflect: Choose a few words or phrases to reflect on. Write them in your journal, and spend some time reflecting on them. Look at the footnotes in your Study Bible. Reflect a bit on these questions, too: what were some of the consequences of Adam and Eve's disobedience: for each of them, for their relationship with each other, for their relationship with God? What is God like in this story? What does it suggest to you that God moved toward Adam and Even *after* they had sinned?

Apply: In light of your reflections on this passage what is the Spirit calling us to do?

Share your reflections and applications with each other.

Pray together. Don't share prayer requests—just pray them instead.