

7-5-26

Mulligans

Deuteronomy

I suspect, in a group this size there are some golfers or at least some former golfers in the crowd. I've enjoyed playing a few rounds of golf myself. Believe it or not, I was even a member of a public golf course way back when I was single, fresh out of college, and employed at my first job.

Back then, I worked the second shift at the Kraft cheese plant in Stockton, Illinois. On several occasions, I would get up in the morning and head out to the course and get at least 9 holes in before I had to clock in for my afternoon shift. Boy, those were the days. Footloose and fancy free, nearly 40 years ago!

Even if you've never played golf, you're probably familiar with the term mulligan. In a casual round of golf, a mulligan means you get a do-over - a second chance - especially after striking a poorly executed shot in which the ball lands ... who knows where - the pond, the woods or in my case, the neighboring farmer's cornfield - and not only do you get a do-over, you are not penalized for the do-over.

Mulligans are great, but in competitive play, a mulligan is taboo - totally illegal,

I remember a story one golfer told me about his infamous mulligan. As he tells it, he was golfing alone, and after hitting a terrible first shot on one particular hole, he decided to drop another ball and take his mulligan. As it turned out, his do-over t - shot went straight into the hole - a hole in one!

Well, that shot was witnessed by another golfer, so he immediately got to be the golf course's celebrity for the day. He even got his name and picture in the local paper. But what he didn't tell them was that it was his mulligan shot!

To this day he confesses that he felt quite sheepish with all the attention he received since his hole-in-one shot was his mulligan, his do-over.

This morning I'm preaching out of the book of Deuteronomy, and maybe I'll preach from Deuteronomy again if a mulligan is granted or if the Lord leads, but for now, I want you to know that the title Deuteronomy, besides being a word that doesn't easily roll off one's lips, means "repetition of the law".

This title actually comes from the mistranslation of a Hebrew phrase which means "copy of this law." In the Hebrew language, this Old Testament book is referred to *'elleh haddebarim* which means "These are the words" or more simply, *debarim* "words".

This makes sense since the opening sentence of the book begins with the words ... *"These are the words Moses spoke to all Israel in the desert east of the Jordan."*

Now it's extremely important for us to understand the background of what is going on here not only in the first few chapters of Deuteronomy, but throughout the entire book. And this is why I opened my message with the story of my friend's mulligan. Because what we're witnessing here is God, in a sense, offering a mulligan to the Israelites – a do-over, if you will.

You see, Moses is standing before a new generation of Israelites and he's going to tell the story of the preceding generation from 40 years earlier – the preceding 40 years which began with miraculous and historic events including the ten plagues, the pillars of cloud and fire, and the parting of the Red Sea, but ends up resulting in punishment and death because of a generation of unbelief.

The forty years prior to Moses standing before the Israelites as he is now doing in the book of Deuteronomy saw Moses lead God's people out of Egypt, a land of slavery. Their destination: a parcel of land that offers freedom, protection, and abundance - the Promised Land. The land that God promised to give to His chosen people beginning centuries earlier with Abraham.

I'm sure most of us are familiar with God's promise to Abram recorded in the first book of the Bible: Genesis 12 beginning in verse 4 says ... *"So, Abram left, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot and all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there ... The Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.'*

So, God, as He always does, is making good on His earlier promise to Abram ...

first by hearing the Israelites' cry for help,

then by raising up a leader named Moses, who, by God's mighty and outstretched arm leads this mass of humanity out of Egypt and toward freedom.

But this is when the trouble begins – and I don't mean to insult your intelligence. I'm sure you are well aware of what happened next. Instead of taking a relatively short journey to the promised land - according to Deuteronomy 1:2, it should have taken about 11 days - It took them four decades.

This is the setting in which we find Moses at the beginning of the book of Deuteronomy - Forty years later - once again standing at the doorstep of the promised land, exhorting God's people to go in and possess the land that God has promised to give them.

In a sense, God is giving the Israelites a do-over. True, maybe not to the earlier generation that perished in the desert because of their rebellion and lack of belief, but to this new generation who also experienced the harshness of desert life.

It's interesting to take a moment and think about those who are now standing on the brink of the promised land. As far as their age goes, there probably wouldn't be many people over the age, of say ... 60, would there? All the rest would be younger if they were born after the Exodus.

So, for the majority of this new generation of Israelites ...

They would never have experienced the taskmasters' whip and brutal tactics.

Most of them would never have laid eyes upon the cities and pyramids that their parents were forced to build.

And their stomachs would not have known anything but quail and manna.

So, their life experiences would have been quite unique indeed because though they were exposed to the harshness of their environment and witnessed God's righteous judgment on an unbelieving generation, they also experienced God's faithful provision for forty years.

Now here's where I need to take a little detour in my sermon which seems appropriate since our topic includes the world's most famous detour.

So, here's my question:

What are we to make of God's seemingly drastic, over-the-top punishment of the Israelites, namely their forty-year banishment to the desert?

Many might say - and have said - that the punishment does not fit the crime. (It's okay if you think this. I've probably held this view for many years, especially when I first read the story as a new Christian, and, not having given it much thought, was uncertain what to make of it.)

But I pose this question to you:

Did God send the Israelites into the desert wilderness to merely punish the Israelites for the rebellion and unbelief or did He have another, higher goal in mind? I like to think He did.

What I'm saying is that many may view the Israelite's punishment as terminal - in other words ... complete and final and without any hope of forgiveness. But I don't necessarily see it this way.

I mean think of it this way: The greatest leader that the Hebrews ever had, Moses, he too was banned by God from entering the promised land. Moses even begged God to let him enter. See Deuteronomy 3: 23 – 26. But he was not allowed to, although he was able to see it from the mountain top.

Well, this is different, you protest. Moses still had faith. He wasn't like the others who rebelled and had no faith.

But this is exactly my point.

What if God, because of his wisdom and mercy and compassion decided that it is better for the faithless Israelites to wander the desert for forty years in hopes that they would come to their senses and find their faith than to let them enter the promised land without faith at all?

Perhaps this is what God was up to!

If it takes forty years to find your faith, then so be it. It's better to come to faith late than never at all. And I believe that when I finally get to heaven, I'm going to meet a lot of Israelites who never made it to the earthly promised land but made it to the heavenly one because in the desert, they finally repented and found their faith! And every one of them is going to say virtually the same thing when I see them in heaven: That their 40 year detour was ultimately worth it because although they missed the earthly blessing, they did not miss out on the heavenly one.

If they had had a do – over, would they have entered the land with faith?

Of course they would!

Hindsight is 20/20. But they couldn't change their past. All they could do was live with the consequences of their sin and move on, confessing their sin and trusting in the God of love who reminds us every day that this world in which we live and have our being is not the end all / be all of our existence. We are simply passing through this world, and if we have faith in a loving and forgiving God and in His Son Jesus, then missing out on certain earthly experiences doesn't have to be terminal or fatal condition, because God has something so much more incredible in store for us.

This is exactly the theme of Hebrews chapter 11:

Abel was tragically killed by his brother Cain at a young age and failed to experience so much of what this world has to offer, but do you think Abel is sad and regretting his life? Not in the least! He is with God in heaven which is so much better than anything we could ever experience on earth!

And what about Noah? Did he not experience God's love, protection and forgiveness? Of course he did – and he needed God's forgiveness even after he built that monstrous ark.

And Abraham. The author of Hebrews tells us that he was stranger in the land God gave to him. That couldn't have been a piece of cake.

How would we handle ourselves if we were treated as foreigners in our own country?

Here we are, one day after our country's 250th birthday. We celebrate our country's founding and the freedoms and the rights we cherish, but what if one day all these privileges and comforts and rights were taken away from us? How would we respond?

And what if when they are, we finally come to faith in God?

Could we ever say it was worth it? Or would we just bemoan the fact that we lost out on earthly and worldly freedoms?

If we have to go through sever trial and tribulation? Could we ever say that it was worth it – that in giving it all it all up we found our way back to God?

I don't know if we ever could.

If you've watched the news lately, you probably have heard the latest theme and public sentiment: According to certain polls, a good percentage of Americans are seemingly not proud of being American. And I know this makes many of us who are patriotic mad and disgusted and angry, especially those who have fought for and defended this country. I consider myself patriotic and I for one am repulsed by those who say terrible untruths about our country.

At the same time, I sort of understand where they're coming from - why so many do have negative feelings about the U.S. And I think the root of their feelings comes down to frustration because they do not see this country living up to its ideals, standards and goals.

But I think the critics have made one major error / mistake: They have misplaced their blame. In my opinion, it's not the country's fault or the idea of independence or democracy or capitalism.

I think the blame falls squarely on every one of us who believes in the false notion that when things get difficult and challenging and nearly impossible, they think it's because God hates them, and is somehow out to hurt and harm and punish them.

This is the exact twisted and erroneous belief that caused God to send that generation of Israelites into the desert. I'm reading from Deuteronomy 1:27: "You grumbled in your tents and said, '*The Lord hates us; so, He brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us.*'"

I want you to take moment to assess the last 40 years of your life. If after taking a moment of reflection.

What can you honestly say about God?

Is he a God that is out to get you and punish you and make your life nearly intolerable?

Or is He a God that has preserved and protected and cherished your life giving you blessings too numerous to count?

Whichever way you happen to feel this morning about this question, remember this God allows for do-overs. And as long as you have breath in your lungs. God is ready to restore you to faith and give you all the privileges of being a child of God.

This earth and world with all of its joys and trials is only the beginning of what God has for those who love him. Like the new generation of Israelites, a new adventure awaits, but it must begin with faith in the loving, forgiving God of the Bible. Amen.