

**“Walking”** is a metaphor for spiritual life that comes with thousands of years of history. In Genesis, God calls **Abram** from Babylon to a land of Promise and after he's been there 25 years God appears and says, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless,” (Ge 17:1). Centuries later when Israel is about to enter the Promised Land (again), **Moses** commands them to “walk” faithfully before God, so that you may live and prosper, (Dt 5:33).

Once we start paying attention, walking is a metaphor we find all over the place; from the earliest, primal histories when a guy named **Enoch**, “walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him,” (Ge. 5.24), all the way to the closing verses of St. John's **Apocalypse** when the visionary says the new Jerusalem will be so amazing it won't even need a sun because God himself will be the light and all nations will walk by the light of God (Rev. 21.24).

We could put it like this: **walking is a metaphor for our lives in motion before God**. Our lives are always in motion, always changing, always growing — in one direction or another. 3 months on sabbatical with a 16 mo. child who is now a 19 mo. child reveals just how much life changes. [If I may offer the obligatory baby update, let me tell you, our family was transformed a few weeks ago when Penny learned how to say the word “yes”. Do you realize how many opportunities appear when a child doesn't just say “no”? Amazing.]

The point is this. Whether we're 19 mos. or 90 yrs., life keeps moving. And we can be sure over the last 3 months that our lives as pastor & parish have kept

moving. So today on this first Sunday back, let's explore one of our best metaphors for life in motion before God. Let's explore what it means to walk before God together; not least because, you guessed it, that metaphor is all over the place in our readings.

**Today in Ephesians “walking” is the key metaphor** when Paul says, “Be careful how you walk, not as unwise people but as wise,” (Eph. 5.15). Our translation says “be careful how you live,” but trust me, the word is literally “walk.” So let's do this. Let's unpack Paul's metaphor with our own metaphor. It's not a competition, but one good metaphor deserves another. So today, let me offer the deeply spiritual game of cornhole as a metaphor for our lives in motion before God. Cornhole —also known as bean bag toss, baggo, bags, sack toss, or bean sack — the game where you lob beanbags toward a barely-large-enough hole about 30 feet away, *that* game is a brilliant metaphor for walking before God. Because in cornhole you don't actually go anywhere.

Ironically it's our focus on going somewhere that can mislead us when we hear the metaphor of walking. We're so focused on progress, achievement, or arriving at a specific place that we miss the metaphor. It's not that we never go anywhere, but **walking as a metaphor is less about going somewhere and more about relating to someone.** In Scripture we walk before God, we walk in step with Jesus, we walk in the power of the Spirit. It's relational.

This is why I love the cornhole metaphor. Because even though you aren't

going anywhere, you must be keenly aware of your body's motion. Every single motion counts. The way you hold the beanbag, the way you swing your arm—and not just how strong you swing but how much your swing drifts—the way you step when you swing. So what happens is this. **You must be keenly aware of every motion without isolating on any single motion.** Because the moment you isolate one thing—your grip, your swing, your step, your drift—you overcompensate or leave out all the other motions.

The best you can do is relax, focus, breathe. If you take it seriously, it's incredibly centering. Look, I know cornhole has a reputation for being played in various states of sobriety, but I can tell you over the last 2 summers I've spent hours playing cornhole (sober) up in Maine. It's one of the most meditative practices I know. Some people have a similar experience walking a labyrinth, but if anyone's interested in the spirituality of cornhole, let's talk.

Like cornhole, the walking metaphor means that we're keenly aware of every motion. **Every single motion of our lives counts.** Every motion is gathered up and presented before God. Every motion counts; our work, our relationships, our entertainment. It all counts as we're walking before God. But we can't ever make the mistake of isolating any single motion as the thing that "really counts" in our life before God. Because the moment we isolate one thing, we overcompensate or leave out all the other motions of our lives. We can't pretend that walking before God is about finding the right system, or following the right rules. No. Whether

we're playing cornhole or walking before God we always have to include every single motion.

So today when Paul invites us to be careful how we live, to walk wisely, we shouldn't think he's throwing out rules. Things like, "Don't get drunk. Sing church songs instead." If that's all we hear, it sounds pretty lame. If all we hear is a kind of weak attempt at religious advice, we're missing the metaphor. Walking here is less about going somewhere and more about relating to someone. **Paul's drawing our attention the energizing relationship at the center of our lives.** The relationship from which every single action grows. Here's why the passage isn't really about a rule (drinking), and really about a relationship (God) instead.

In Ephesus (where he's writing), getting drunk was a religious event. Seriously. It was a ritual for the cult of **Dionysus**, a nature god of fertility & wine. Getting drunk (supposedly) served the religious purpose of loosening inhibitions (which it does) & unlocking human potential (which it usually doesn't). In practice the rituals of this cult could lead to violence, rape, or murder. So Paul says, don't do it. Don't pretend that getting drunk will make you more like a god, even if it makes you feel like a god. Dionysus is not a good relationship as the energizing force of your life. Instead, Paul says, be filled with the Spirit. Commune with Jesus in worship. Consume Jesus in Eucharist. And you'll discover that **instead of suffering a destructive chaos, your community will experience a constructive harmony** as your lives become music before God. It's not about the rules. It's

about the energizing relationship at the center of our lives.

[If we had more time we could look at 1 Kings....]

In the end, I suppose we could say that **walking is metaphor not just for life-in-motion but for love-in-motion**. Walking isn't a metaphor for any kind of motion. It's not like a spiritual fitness tracker that compulsively jolts us to clear our activity bar. Walking before God is about the motion of love, because God is love. Love is always moving. It never stands still. Love-in-motion. That's what the metaphor is about. Receiving divine love. Returning divine love. Sharing divine love. We'll close with a few words about walking in love.

One of our 13th ce. theologians, **Bernard of Clairvaux**, wrote about our growth through the stages of love.<sup>1</sup> For the past 800 years the church has recognized the wisdom of Bernard's work. Here's what he says. Bernard says if we're going to learn to love, most of us begin by loving ourselves for our own sake. I love me for me. I look out for #1. Unfortunately, some people—lots of people— never grow past that stage. But if we do, we may find ourselves loving God, for our own sake. We think if we love God that our lives will go better, and in some ways, they do. But not for long. Because God is never just a security blanket. So if we're going to continue growing in love eventually we have to learn to love God for God's sake. Simply because God is God, the source of all that is beautiful, good, and true. Finally, some people through long & often difficult experience,

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Peterson, *Practice Resurrection*, pp. 211-13.

learn to love themselves for God's sake; to see themselves as people who exist to share God's beauty, truth, and goodness with all creation.

In the end, we could say **church is where we learn to walk in the ways of divine love**. It can be a long and difficult process. We'll have stumbles along the way. But we keep coming. Because worship is how we internalize God's love. Eucharist is how we're nourished by God's love (Jn. 6.56). Community is where we experience harmony in the Spirit. For all of our flaws, Church is our love-in-motion before God. We keep coming. As we're nourished & filled with divine life, our promise & our hope is that we'll become imitators of God, beloved children, [however imperfect] who learn to, "walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 5:1-2). *Amen.*