

"Catch & Release"

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Do you know the names Ron Hall and Denver Moore? You may not remember the names, but I bet you remember their story. The story of Ron Hall and Denver Moore was immortalized in the book *Same Kind of Different as Me*, a best seller a few years back. To refresh your memory....

Ron Hall was, and is, a wealthy, successful fine art dealer Fort Worth. Turns out that in the 70's and 80's there were lots of rich Texans in Fort Worth who wanted to own fine art, and Ron was happy to sell it to them, very profitably. Ron had a loving wife, and two great kids, in short, living the American dream.

Denver Moore, sharecropper from Louisiana, picked cotton all his life, never attended school, cannot read or write. On a whim, one day he hops a train, gets off in Fort Worth. He is homeless, jobless, lives in shelters, under bridges, on the street. In short, he has gotten very few breaks in life. Not much of the American dream for Denver.

Ron's wife was a church going lady, what Denver later called a "do-gooder, who volunteered at the shelter that Denver frequented, and Debbie drags her husband Ron to the shelter to help out. Ron meets Denver, they begin to spend some time together. Ron is uneasy, he has never known anyone like Denver, and Denver is uneasy, he has learned that strangers are rarely trustworthy.

One day, they are having lunch near the mission, and Denver asks Ron a question.

I have heard that white folks sometimes when they go fishing, they catch fish and then throw them back. Is that true? Ron says, yes, they are fishing just for the sport of it, they don't want the fish, it's called catch and release. Denver says, now, I just don't understand that, when I catch fish it is to eat them, and to show them off to other people that appreciate good fishing. They both pause to think about fishing and their different life views, and then Denver asks Ron a question. Is that what you are going to do with me? Ron says what do you

mean. Denver says, you know, that's what a lot of folks do at the shelter, they come and meet us homeless people, they visit a little, but then they release us. They don't really want to get to be friends, they just want to catch and release us. Is that what you want to do with me? Because if that is what is gonna happen, I ain't interested, you're wasting my time.

Ron realizes that Denver is asking a serious question, and he answers carefully, that he is indeed interested in being friends with Denver, that he does not plan to catch and release him. Denver thinks about the answer, and says, you know this changes everything, because if we are going to be friends, I am only interested in being serious friends, friends for life. Denver says, I am a homeless man, looking for a home, but not a home in a building or a shelter, I am looking for a home in your heart, in your family, in your life. Ron hesitates because he realizes that this is a significant commitment, and from that moment on, between Ron and Denver, nothing is the same.

Ron invests time in Denver, he learns from his friend, learns lessons about life and faith and sorrow and hope. And Denver blesses Ron with friendship and support and brotherhood. Ron caught Denver, and didn't release him, and his life has never been the same since.

Last week, Jim reminded us of the story of Abraham, and his journey of faith, beginning in Ur and leading to the land of Canaan. I liked Jim's image that God "leaned down" to speak to his people, to the man he chose to be a blessing to all nations. We heard the concept that God had given Abraham a "gracious invitation." We heard that God asked Abraham to be his friend. Today we hear our scripture lesson from this morning, where the story picks up. Abraham is confronted by god, and God says, I have plans for you, and I can walk with you, and I can be by your side, I desire to be your friend, but I require something of you, I require your faith, your trust. Catch me, God says, but don't release me. If you just plan to release me, we are wasting time. And Abraham is intrigued, and is drawn to God, but he hesitates, when the going gets tough, when the road is hard, Abraham is not completely sure. You can almost sense the panic in Abraham. He catches God, but then releases him, going to Egypt, and following his own way. He seems to say, God, I like your style, and I know what you are saying is true, I can follow you, but only so far, but I am not ready to really rely on you, really commit to you. And in Egypt, he has the episode with his wife, he lies to the Egyptians, dishonors his wife, and then is caught in his lie. Pharoah

asks him, in one translation, “what have you done to me?” It could be God asking the same question. Abraham is embarrassed, and humiliated, and God asks him again, are you going to release me, or are we going to be friends, real friends for life? When he leaves Egypt, God provides again, sends him back to the promised land, and Abraham remembers, Abraham gets it, he not only catches God, but he holds on to him, he turns back to God, he doesn’t release him. And Abraham, and the world, are changed forever.

Have you ever considered that God is homeless? Sure, he created everything, he made everything, all that is - is his. He is like Denver, he is on the street, and in the shelter, and under the bridges, and yet no one place is really his. And yet, God really has no interest in living in places. He desires to live in people. Over the centuries, men and women have tried to build homes for God – in the ancient times, they built tabernacles and temples. We even tell our own children that this church is God’s house, that’s why we treat it carefully and reverently. But it’s not true. When this room is empty of people, when we are not here, it is cold and quiet, and God is no more here than he is at the convenience store. It is only when this room is filled with people, with hearts that search for God, with folks who will catch and not release him, that God moves in, and then truly – he is home.

I wonder if this is not the situation for a lot of Christians. They catch God, and enjoy his creation, and spend some time with him, but then they release him. I think I know something about this, because I see that have done this very thing myself. It is easy to catch God, as easy as having a cup of coffee with a homeless man in Fort Worth. I catch God, I listen to a stirring sermon, or hear inspired music from the choir, or share in beautiful prayer, or serve on a mission team, or attend a Cursillo, and I sense God, and I love what he does on this earth and through his people. It is easy to catch God, he is always around, and the opportunities to meet him are endless. He extends that “gracious invitation” every day, and in many different settings. It’s like going to the homeless shelter, there are always people to meet, and talk to, and share a few words or a meal. But then comes a moment, when God asks, like Denver asked, are you ready to commit more? Are you ready to really let me into your life? God says, I need to know, because this is serious for me, and for you, are you just going to catch and release me, or are we going to be friends. God wants to know, will I have a home in you?

You know, we hesitate when are faced with a homeless god looking for a place to live, just like Ron hesitated when Denver asked him the same question. It is a commitment, a contract, a covenant that God takes seriously, and we should too. It is an issue of trust, and of faith. God doesn't want a building to live in, he wants a friend, a friend with a heart he can inhabit.

So, how do the stories end? Well, Denver and Ron do become friends, and Ron does not release Denver. But Ron's beloved wife dies after a long battle with cancer, and Denver is there for the entire ordeal. Ron spends many months dealing with questions of life, and death, and love for his wife, and Denver walks alongside him every step of the way. Ron, looking back on it, cannot imagine how he could have endured it all without Denver. And Denver reminds him, that's what friends do, friends who are caught and not released. When you decided that we are friends, Denver reminds Ron, that you were not gonna catch and release me, that's when everything changed.

And we know how the story of Abraham ends. It takes Abraham a little time to seal his commitment with God, to agree not to release God, but when he does, his life is put on a new path, and new trajectory. There are still trials, and sorrow, and suffering, but after God finds a home in Abraham's heart, Abraham lives a blessed life, a life in which God is a constant companion through good and bad. And the result is, that when Abraham dies, we are told that he looked back on his life, satisfied. At the end of the book of Genesis, we are told "Abraham lived 175 years. Then he took his final breath. He died happy at a ripe old age, full of years." What a wonderful blessing, to look back on your life without regrets, without disappointment, but with satisfaction, knowing that your trust and faith had been repaid with a completed, full life. You know, thousands of years after Abraham died, the apostle Paul was writing about him, and noticed the same thing. Paul said, Abraham got it right, he made the right choices, not in his accomplishments, not in his possessions, but in his faith and trust in God, that's what made him a man whose life we honor. Paul remembered, Abraham caught God, and did not release him.

So, what about you and me? It is an easy thing to go fishing, and then let the fish go. You don't eat the fish, you don't show it off to your friends, you have no commitment with the fish. You catch it, and then release it, it is gone. It is so easy to go the homeless shelter and hand out a sandwich, and go home, and no one is changed. It is so easy to go to church and worship, and sing, and see

friends, and enjoy that experience. And that is good, God is pleased that we have come this far. But he intends for us to go farther, he always intends for us to go farther. He extends the gracious invitation and he always asks the question, are you going to catch and release me? Can God find a home in you, and in me?

This year Jim tells us that the focus of our Sunday sermons and teaching will be on our Legacy, what we leave with people that are around us, and what we leave in people that come after us. As I get older, I am more and more intrigued by the idea of my legacy – how I am living my life now, and what kind of memories people will have of me after I am gone. If I say I am committed to a life of faith, that I do trust in a God who desires to be my friend, how would anyone know that it was true by looking at me? What evidence is visible now, and what evidence will I leave behind, that I caught God, but did not release him? How we live now, and what we have to share with others, and what we leave after we are gone, is largely directed by the faith decisions and trust decisions we make now. Jesus says, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be answered. But Ron Hall and Abraham could tell you, God also does some door knocking, and then waits to see how and how and when we will answer.

He asks, are you ready for things to change?

A homeless God, looking for a place to live, a life to inhabit. Perhaps it is time for us to catch, and not release. Like Denver said, that kind of friendship is forever, and things will never be the same.

Let us pray...