

“A Forest of Good News”

Sermon on Psalm 1

September 13, 2020

Rev. Dr. Bobby Hulme-Lippert

I was teaching some of the confirmation class this past week with eight of our students. And at one point I had the class stand in a couple lines facing in the same direction in the grassy area just by the Education Building and just beside the breezeway.

I said, the first question you all are going to respond to when you become members of this church is this: “Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?”

“So, now, pretend that direction is the way of sin and evil. What do you see?”

And they named it - people who treat others badly, bullying, lying, cheating, stealing, selfishness. One said “Shadows. “Imagery that isn’t any one sinful or evil thing but rather suggests a pervasive, shifting darkness - also fleeting and weightless.

What would you add when you paint the picture of that direction?

Happy are those who do not follow the **advice** of the **wicked**, or **take the path** that **sinner tread**, or **sit in the seat** of **scoffers**;

In Hebrew, those verbs and nouns of Psalm 1:1 purposely come together to suggest the prevalence and opportunity of wickedness and sin.

The thing is, the root word for “wicked” used here in Psalm 1 does not mean “evil deeds,” but rather, “to depart from the path.” Wickedness can come in many terrible forms that we might readily name - and also many seemingly benign forms that are one way or another a departure from the path of God.

I think this idea is underscored when we look over to verse 4 where we are given an image for what “the wicked” or “the way of the wicked” looks like.

“The wicked (those who walk in this way) are like chaff that the wind drives away.”

If you have ever seen chaff winnowed from the grain, the chaff is the light, dry substance caught by the air, and for a few moments flurry-filled moments it looks so busy and full - but in truth it is really quite weightless. Lacks in substance. It’s fleeting, and the wind blows it away.

In John 15 Jesus says “apart from me you can do nothing.” Which isn’t true in one sense.

We can do lots of things and stay plenty busy and accomplish much. But...Jesus is making the same point this image makes in Psalm 1 - “Yes, you can live this life with a flurry of activity of this and that...” but if its done apart from God, if its done without the anchoring and nourishment of eternal life welling up and feeding from the depths one’s being...it blows away.

What is the undercurrent that feeds our work? Our lives? Our church?

Wickedness need not be the terrible things those people do...how often it can be found when the church churns out program after program and our schedules churn out activity after activity and we juggle marvelously this and that...but cannot remember the last time we honored the Sabbath, the last time we drank deeply from Living Water.

I wonder if some of us showed up today feeling somewhere deep down somewhat akin to chaff in the wind blown here and there - whether by the things of this world or the things of our lives- or both...and aching to be rooted in a time when so much is unrooted.

I asked the confirmation students if they were familiar with a move that is done frequently in marching bands and military movements: an about face.

Together, in the green grass at FPC between our two buildings, we practiced doing about faces so that they could a full, clean ‘about face’ from the way of sin and evil...and toward the way of God.

And I asked them to tell me about this direction. “What do you see? Hear? Smell? Taste? How do you describe this direction?”
What would you say?

Psalm 1 calls this direction the “blessed” direction, a word that speaks of a life deeply satiated and at peace...even amid the come and go of all kinds of circumstances and endeavoring upon unknowns and challenges of all sorts. The blessed way.

And unlike the wicked whose ways can seem such a flurry of fundamentally weightless activity...the blessed are given an image that suggests a fundamental stillness: the blessed are like trees planted beside streams of water.

Trees stand still; they are rooted in one place. There is nothing fast about the tree. Some seasons trees can appear entirely dead.

Eventually though, in season, the tree bursts forth with fresh fruit and deep foliage. And what does the Psalm declare is the central difference between

- a life of weightless frenzy and life of steady substance,
- the difference between the way of the wicked and the way of the blessed,
- the difference between chaff and trees?

It boils down to this singular thing:

“(the blessed) their delight (the thing that gives them greatest joy, the thing that most invigorates them....their delight) is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.”

As Dr. Currie so powerfully reminded us in his sermon last week, the law of God is summed up in the command to love God and love neighbor.

“the blessed, you could say, “their delight is in loving God and neighbor. Not a mushy love but a real love, a genuine love, a persistent love for all the right people all the wrong people, too. Their delight is in law which finds its summation in love.”

I asked those students to paint a picture of this direction...joy, peace, *love*.

One said food.

One said “people helping people.”

And then one noticed that they were staring in the direction of our Education Building and actually looking directly at the stained glass window in the Education Building.

And do any of you recall what is in that stained glass?

Jesus with two children.

And so this student - staring at the stained glass - goes, “This direction, this way of God...it looks like Jesus.”

Nailed it. We Christians believe Jesus to be the Word of God incarnate...in the flesh. The Love of God incarnate...in the flesh.

And so you could say the blessed ones delight in Jesus and what Jesus has done and is doing and will do because Jesus is the Word of God, Jesus is Love.

The blessed ones delight in Jesus. Or as John 15 puts it, they “abide” or “remain” in Jesus and so know full, enduring fruitfulness.

Which begs the very practical question:

- How then does one know their greatest delight to be upon Jesus?
- How does one abide in Jesus?
- How is one supposed to live a life saturated in God's way, God's word, God's love?

Here is the Good News of Jesus Christ. The answer is not that we need to do two more things or three new things or six spiritual exercises.

The Good News is this: Trees cannot plant themselves by water. By grace, Jesus has already replanted us in the current of the Holy Spirit.

How many times does Paul tell us that as Christians we live "in Christ?"

Paul does not simply declare that we believe things about Jesus who is over there or that we try and emulate Jesus's example given us 2000 years ago...

Paul goes so much further declaring that by grace of God we are pulled from the way of the wicked, given an about face by grace, and this very day we are planted, rooted, and living in Christ.

We abide in an eternal spring.

The truly beautiful thing about trees rooted by water is that the water is automatic.

The water does not discern between trees and give itself to some and not others.

Jesus does not flow more abundantly underneath super Christians or super denominations or super extraordinary people - or flow less through those kind of Christians.

- The water feeds all of the trees.
- The water only knows to keep feeding.
- The water only knows to keep giving.

Psalm 23 famously states that the Good Shepherd makes me lie down beside still waters. "Still" there does not describe the water itself. In the Hebrew it is actually describing what the water does. It stills, it quiets the soul. Away from the flurry and the anxious to and fro...the water stills, quiets, anchors the soul with life.

This is the gift of grace about which we can do nothing. This is the life in which we are rooted now and forever by the grace of Jesus Christ.

Did you know you can go to San Gabriel Park and there are spots where you can close your eyes and hear...yes, the walkers and runners, the cars coming and going, the

nearby construction...but there are parts where you can stand, close your eyes and hear water.

The gentle flow of the San Gabriel, made all the more apparent if the wind picks up just so. And the facts of its presence makes clear why those trees along the banks have grown so high and wide throughout the years even thought out the droughts.

Is it not deeply good news that there is church in the heart of Georgetown, TX who by the grace of God is rooted in Jesus whose living water will not cease? Whose living water will flow faithfully in season and out of season to bring forth in time the fruit of "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

The invitation of Psalm 1 is not to become busier, to find one more good thing to do, to try harder...but instead to close our eyes, not place all our trust in the dead branches may seem so visible... and listen.

- The water flows beneath.
- The water saturates the roots.
- The water cannot help but be faithful.

And in season the same water that brought forth from death life, shall bring forth from empty, tried branches, and broken branches - fruit - "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

And we, First Presbyterian Church, shall be what we have always been by the grace of Jesus Christ - a Forest of Good News. Thanks be to God. Amen.