

Sunday - September 20, 2009

Pastor - Rev. Paula P. Werner

Sermon - **They are Like Trees Planted by Streams of Water**

Scripture Psalm 1 do Psalter *“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be formed by your grace for you are our Lord, our rock and our redeemer Amen.”*

The longer I've lived, the more I've come to realize that sometimes there are times and years which are just plain difficult – that some years are good, and some years are a struggle to live through. The Bible says that the rain falls on the just and the unjust ---- and our task is to figure out how to live through the hard times. It's been a particularly challenging year thus far for our family, as some of you realize. Our daughter-in-law was diagnosed with liver cancer in March, our niece and two children were murdered in May, charges were brought against our Youth Director in July, then our daughter-in-law died in August—leaving 2 children motherless. It's been a hard season of loss and grief. While these hurts have hit our family in a seemingly unrelenting manner, we are not the only ones who suffer. You --- all of you --- have griefs and losses which you too struggle with.

So, what are we called to learn from these life experiences – these losses? I believe Psalm 1 has some solid instruction for us all today, who are struggling with coping. Those of you who read the scriptures printed in the bulletin every week for the upcoming week know that Psalm 1 is one of the lectionary readings for this Sunday. And I find it a particularly helpful reading as a follow-up to last week's sermon by Rev. Teresa Smith -- which I understand was well received by you. The images of Psalm 1 are poetry --- we are counseled to be like a tree planted by water, and not be like chaff—those dry seed coverings which blow about and are useless.

We are to be like trees.....strong, stately, beautifully shaped, secure trees. Roy and I saw trees like this on a recent trip to James Madison's home in Mountpelier. One of the remarkable aspects of the grounds were some very old trees, planted during the lifetime of James Madison ---- making these trees more than 200+ years old--trees that had weathered the storms over the years looking at them, I tried to imagine the history that had played out around them and in their shade over the last 20 years. You know the kind of trees I'm describing –can you picture one you've seen?

The writer of this first psalm in the Bible compares a godly person to a tree. Not just any tree, but a tree planted by streams of water. In the desert of Israel, which the writer of this Psalm well knew, in order for a tree to grow, it needs to be near streams of water. Trees do not grow in the desert unless there is a source of water brought to them. To be strong, growing to full maturity, to bear fruit – to be productive, a tree has certain basic needs. So, too, a godly person.

The Psalm describes a godly person --- first in negative terms.... saying You are happy or blessed if you do NOT associate with evildoers. The godly person will not be found in the company of those who deliberately choose evil.

The godly person will NOT follow the way of those who scoff—who ridicule or disdain the holy way. So, if that is what the godly person will NOT do. What does the godly person do? The psalm writer says, the godly find pleasure reading and thinking about God's ways and law. They study what God has to teach – they want to do this. And, this kind of activity --- this reading and meditating – this spending time with God through study has a good effect.....The godly are then compared to trees planted by streams of water.

Like trees –rooted and grounded --- so too are you and I to be rooted and grounded ... in God. The goal of life is not in getting all the money and toys one can buy, in a never-ending pursuit of pleasure --- there are never enough toys, or money or travel or stocks or cars, boats, clothes, jewels to fulfill us..... it is a never-ending quest. Richness and success is not about getting what one wants, but instead from being connected to the source of life – God. Oh, at our core we know this and especially when the really awful times come, we realize that all our spending and getting does nothing to assuage the hurt, pain and loss of our lives. Something deeper, more real is needed.

Unfortunately, it seems to take the hurting times to remind us of this. When our loved one dies --- when we have lost our mother or father, or spouse or child, or our dearest friend,-- we realize that all our money and “stuff” -- our expensive toys aren't our consolation..... these nice toys are just that --- nice toys, but they are not the center and groundedness of our being. The wrenching times of our lives reminds us of what matters -- our relationship to God. Only God gives us answers about life and provides the way to connect in love.

Not only does Psalm 1 tell us to be like the tree, rooted and grounded, the Psalm also tells us how NOT to be. We are not to be wicked; the wicked are portrayed as chaff. The chaff has no fixed place. Chaff is not attached to anything, nothing is secure. It is tossed about by whatever wind, whatever events, come along. Chaff is at the mercy of the elements. So are we -- without God. Who do we believe, what do we believe, what do we base our lives on? The world tells us to base it on money, independence, on success, on fame..... that this will provide our lives with security, with meaning, with hope. But the chaff, blows about, and we too will be tossed about, unanchored, if we follow the world's way.

The psalmist portrays these two images specifically, and I hope I have emphasized them enough that you are thinking --- HOW can I be more like the tree? How can I be rooted and grounded so that when the traumas of life come, I can deal with them and still grow and live, and look toward a future? You are wise enough to realize that your life can be turned upside down when a baby is born with a terminal illness, an accident results in paralysis, when you're fired from your job or let go because of the economy, when your marriage partner walks out of the marriage, when dementia comes to a loved one, or someone dies.

How do you live through all this? Psalm 1 tells us --- we connect ourselves to God. I recently heard someone ask the question, “How do I become Christ centered, not crises centered?”

You know, over the last 6 months, I've had a bit of a mantra or slogan that I keep repeating to myself --- and to others if they are near by.... It doesn't come out sounding theological or Biblical or even intellectual..... my phrase is "**Just keep on, keepin' on.**" But that phrase is what I cling to, and let me just share what it really stands for in my life and the circumstances of the last 6 months that frankly, have "rattled my cage" and threatened to make me more like chaff than a tree planted by the water. "**Keep on, keeping on**" means that I must continue and must deepen and extend those ways of living that have guided me prior TO the traumas of my life, so that I can get THROUGH them now. So my "**keepin' on**" has meant that I've gone back again and again, to the Bible that has spoken to me over the years --- I remind myself that these words from this book are thousands of years old -- they have stood the test of time, they come from the ultimate source of power, that they can be trusted.... So I read my old trusted verses and remind myself who I am and whose I am. Sometimes in the reading, my eye will wander to other passages (much like following one site on the computer will lead you in all sorts of directions)..... and in that eye wandering, I read something that all of a sudden has meaning to my life situation now. Especially in our troubles -- our griefs and losses --Go back to the Bible..... or if you've never been there in the first place, go to the Bible --- ask someone who has a bit of experience to help you, if you have no idea where to turn for comfort, or instruction. Psalm 1 said that we will be blessed, happy, if we meditate on God's word -- because, you see, it opens us up to a conversation with God,

Secondly, my slogan "**keep on, keepin' on**" has meant that although I had prayed frequently in the past, I now experienced what it says in 1 Thessalonians to pray without ceasing. I've known that verse most of my life, but hadn't quite figured out how you do it. Well, these last couple of months, there have been periods where that was my way of life..... a constant discussion with God. I learned that I don't have all the answers, that my emotions can get in the way of living and especially loving, but that praying --- communicating with God, is a centering activity. Pray without ceasing. We do NOT have to understand the "stuff" that happens to us. It just happens. But we do need to take it to God. My anger over the murder of my niece, Wendy, and her two sons had to be taken to God. My sadness and helplessness in my daughter in law's struggle with liver cancer and feelings of being overwhelmed with what the outcome of her death would mean in our lives --- that is constantly being prayed. The shock, bewilderment, sorrow, pain of the charges concerning our Youth Director were like a tidal wave.....and needed to be prayed.

"**Keep on, keepin' on**"..... means the Bible is an even greater part of our lives, that prayer is unceasing, and that we reach out in love, in Christian community and allow ourselves to be embraced.

God WANTS to water our tree roots. God has a variety of ways to accomplish that. I've recognized God -- his love, compassion, concern, in the ways you have lived and loved one another during this most recent difficulty. I've been most fortunate, most blessed, by the realization that we as a faith community are not alone -- that others care about the challenges we have been

facing. Others have prayed for us and continue to do so, others have called and left kind messages of support and encouragement. Others have emailed and sent cards..... I have been the recipient of these calls, emails and cards, but they have not just been to me --- they have been for you, the congregation. So I wanted you to know of them..... I want you to understand that as Christians we are not alone, no matter the trauma that comes our way. And particularly as Methodists, we are a part of a tremendous connectional church.

This morning I've brought just the cards and emails that have come most recently in response to all the media... Let me read just a few words – would you pass these along the aisle. *** The persons sending these expressions of love, are just like you ----- not really knowing what to say, but wanting to express love to me..... and to you...as people part of a greater family. We come together in family in times of hurt and need.... And that's what our Christian brothers and sisters are doing....I hope we ourselves learn this lesson, so we might reach out to others in their time of need. When we sing the final hymn, would those of you holding these messages of comfort and love, bring them up to the altar and place them there?

So **“keep on, keeping on”** means grounding ourselves in God's Word and instruction, his comfort and hope for us through the Bible, it also means active communication with God (we certainly understand how to phone, email and text each other) praying is the medium to talk with and hear from God. **“Keep on, keeping on”** means both receiving others' love and reaching out in love to others.... Not letting embarrassment, or hurt isolate us – keeping us holed away in our rooms and homes and behind our facades of having it all together.

And **“keep on, keepin' on”** for me means understanding that when we open ourselves to loving others, hurt can come. Grief will be experienced. Grief comes in waves – we can be just fine for awhile and then all of a sudden, the tsunami hits. We are not to give up. We are not to give in. We are to root, ground, center ourselves in God. Please know that as your church family, we are here for you – to listen to one another without judgment, to help point you back toward God. Please tell me how we can minister to you.

I'd like to close reading the sentiments of one card: As you go through this..... Difficult things can cause us to ask, “Why did this happen?” But if we're trusting in Christ we never need to ask, “How could He let this happen?” God may never reveal all his reasons to us, but he has revealed his character to us. His character assures us that he never makes mistakes, is never uncaring, and that he never separates himself from our need.

The need you face is great, but the grace that is yours in Christ is even greater. May your heart and your faith stay fixed upon him as you go through this difficulty. Be assured that he is holding your hand and will not let go!

At another place in the book, she relates a story told by her pastor. When the pastor was seven years old, she had a best friend who got lost one day. "The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, 'You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.'"

Then Anne Lamott concludes with these words, "And that is why I have stayed so close to (my church) – because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home." (Traveling Mercies, p. 55) Then she says, "When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of home – that it's where, when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in. They even said, 'You come back now.'" (Traveling Mercies, p. 100)

Team of folks coming who have worked with other church and will help us in how to get through this... as we walk through the trauma of recent days and what will come.

A conversation about God's presence as well as answering questions.

Things are hard to talk about but we've been open and helping to care for each other and this will help us care for each other the better.

Being able to do things early on, will keep us from continuing to raise issues and the elephant in the room, and keeps us from the work of our congregation.

In his autobiography, Mahatma Gandhi wrote that during his student days he read the Gospels seriously and considered converting to Christianity. He believed that in the teachings of Jesus he could find the solution to the caste system that was dividing the people of India.

So one Sunday he decided to attend services at a nearby church and talk to the minister about becoming a Christian. When he entered the sanctuary, however, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested that he go worship with his own people. Gandhi left the

church and never returned. "If Christians have caste differences also," he said, "I might as well remain a Hindu."

The long version of the Serenity prayer says:

"God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time; accepting hardship as a pathway to peace; taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that you will make all things right if I surrender to your will; so that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with you forever in the next. Amen.

"Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy. O, Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console; to be understood as to understand; to be loved as to love; for it is in giving that we receive; it is in pardoning that we are pardoned; and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life."