

Worship at home
October 18, 2020
Series: “Stewards of souls”

Call to worship:

*They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze.... the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, ‘Where are you?’
~Genesis 3:8, 9*

Let us answer God’s summons.
Let us worship God.
Let us pray.

Prayers of praise, confession, supplication:

Holy Father, the mystery of your presence stretches far beyond us,
yet we know you draw near to us in Christ,
walking beside us, guiding us with wisdom, loving us with boundless grace.
Your Spirit encourages us as we follow Christ
and gives us the energy and insight we need to serve you.
Holy God; Father, Son, and Spirit, we are glad to gather in your presence,
to be embraced by your mystery and your mercy.
For we confess we do need your mercy.
We claim to be your people, but we forget to love as you do.
We claim to seek your guidance, but we often turn from your ways.
We ask for your forgiveness, but we fail to forgive as you forgive.
We claim to listen for your Word, but we ignore your wisdom.
Hear us as, in this silence, we offer you our personal confessions:
(*A time of silence is kept.*)

Forgive us, God of mystery and mercy,
amend who we are and direct who you would have us be
for the sake of Christ, our Saviour and Friend.¹

Assurance of pardon:

Friends, the good news never gets old. God knows us and loves us. It is as much and as simple as that. We are forgiven, loved and set free to start again. Thanks be to God!²

Hymn #371 “Love divine, all loves excelling”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrNz9zC9XHE>

The Word of God read and interpreted:

¹ worship resource for October 18, 2020 from <https://presbyterian.ca/worship>

² Ibid.

Stewards of souls

Introduction:

Our guiding question over the past while has been the one asked in Psalm 137: “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”

One way which we’ve been considering is to learn to give thanks to the Lord in all circumstance.

Another way has a more inward focus:

In the parable of the talents the master entrusted his entire estate to his servants (Matthew 25:14-30.) Everyone was entrusted with some portion of the kingdom’s wealth. No one was thought to be unworthy or unable. No one was left with no responsibility.

God has entrusted each of us with the stewardship of a soul: a body, a mind, an emotional landscape. Each disciple of Jesus sings the Lord’s song, regardless of present circumstances, by taking responsibility for the soul which our Master has entrusted to us.

That will be the focus of our sermons from now until Advent begins on November 29th.

Part A:

To get us started, our first reading is from the apostle Paul’s letter to the Galatians. The wider context of this reading is a conflict that had arisen within the Galatian church about what is proper for Christians to do in regards to the Jewish practice of circumcision. Within his argument, Paul presented a picture of what marks a mature disciple of Jesus.

READ GALATIANS 5:16-25.

There are certain qualities by which you can measure the health and the ripeness of an apple. The colour of the skin and the flesh. The weight. The ratio of sweetness to tartness. The firmness of the flesh. When all of these qualities have matured and are working together, you have a healthy, ripe fruit.

The apostle listed 9 qualities of a Spirit-led life which he called the “fruit of the Spirit”: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. I am going to suggest that a helpful way to read this passage is to recognize that the *fruit* of the Spirit is the individual disciple. The traits listed are qualities which must grow and work together for the well-being of the whole individual.

The metaphor I’m going to use is a fruit tree. Each fruit is a Spirit-led disciple of Jesus. The tree is the church which bears fruit of varying stages of ripeness. The roots are embedded

beliefs which provide either nutrients or toxins to develop or diminish the various qualities of the fruit. And the actions of watering, cultivating, weeding, and fertilizing are the actions of discipleship that can strengthen the good beliefs.

I'm not going to be particularly concerned with trying to apply these 9 qualities by saying things like: "Go therefore and be kind, be loving, be patient, etc.". I think this approach misses the mark and distorts the gospel. These qualities are the Spirit-birthed characteristics of a mature, Christ-like disciple of Jesus. To try and produce them in ourselves is to assume that we can make ourselves Christ-like. They become commands. All we need to do is be gentler; be more in control of our impulses. A problem with this sort of application (apart from pretending that, like Adam and Eve in the garden, we can save ourselves by ourselves), is that it's setting ourselves up for failure and considerable disappointment!

Instead, I want to encourage each of us over the next few weeks to use these 9 qualities to measure your growth as a disciple of Jesus and, in the privacy of your own minds and hearts, nurture the beliefs that will produce and strengthen those qualities that make for a Christ-like, Spirit-led Christian.

Part B:

The quality:

The first quality I want to consider is the first one in Paul's list: love.

READ 1 JOHN 4:7-10, 15, 16

The root:

There are three important root beliefs which need to be nurtured to produce in a disciple the quality of Christian love:

- that there is a living God who defines love, is defined by love, and from whom love flows;
- that I am loved by this God;
- that in the eyes of this God, I am righteous by the ministry of his only Son Jesus, the Messiah.

(1) There is a living God who is love. (2) I am loved by this God. (3) I am declared righteous by this God through the ministry of his only Son, Jesus, the Messiah.

1. There is a living God who is love.

There is an episode of The Simpsons in which, feeling sorry for Ralph Wiggum, Lisa Simpson gave him a valentine card with a picture of a train and the message read: "I choo-choo-choose you!"

It's cute.

And, it describes the nature of the Creator of all things great and small. It describes the nature of the Holy God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob whom we know in Jesus of Nazareth.

The word for 'love' which is predominantly used in the Christian scriptures, and which is abundantly present in the letters of John, is the Greek word, *agape*. *Agape* refers to the conscious choosing to live for the welfare of others. It doesn't depend on emotions or affection. It doesn't depend on shared interests. It might not even make sense to human logic. It is a cognizant choice to improve the life of someone else.

The primary tap-root belief of a disciple of Jesus is that there is a god who is able to act and intervene in human affairs, and who "choo-choo-chooses" to seek the welfare of humanity. The love that is defined by the living God and which describes his character, is the choice to live and die if necessary, for the well-being of creation. And that includes you and me.

2. Which leads us to the second root belief: That I am/that you are loved by this God.

There is a tender and heart-breaking scene in the story of Genesis. After Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit, they "heard the sound of the LORD God as he walked in the garden at the time of the evening breeze." They failed to recognize the presence of a parent who loves and who was reaching out to them, so they hid. And in Genesis 3:9, we read: "the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, 'Where are you?'"

Perhaps this second belief is one of the hardest for us human beings to accept. It's easy to talk about grace and love. But to simply receive the truth that the living LORD God reaches out and calls to us, "Where are you?" is hard to embrace.

From what I know of the issues, psychological and emotional duress; over eating; over drinking; pornography; over shopping; over using drugs (legal or otherwise); over working; over parenting; over exercising, and any other pit in which people find themselves, all have in common at some level an embedded belief that "I am not worthy of receiving love." Perhaps it is expressed differently, but this toxic belief prevails.

The gospel reminds us that this is not true.

God created to share his life. He created because He considers us worthy of sharing his love.

God never ceases to call out: Where are you?

Through the community formed by Torah and re-formed by the prophets, God reached out to humanity.

Through his son, Jesus of Nazareth, God reaches out to humanity.

There is a living God who chooses to live for the well-being of his creation, and you are loved by this God.

3. And the third belief. In reaching out to seek the welfare of humanity, the living God sent his Son to bring us to Him. In Jesus, God reaches across the human-divine divide and brings us into His fellowship; into His courts; into His house. In Jesus, God chooses to declare us righteous.

God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God *but that he loved us and sent his Son* to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1st John 4:9, 10)

The actions of discipleship:

The quality is love.

The root beliefs which will, by the Spirit's grace, nourish this quality are that God is love; that I am loved; and that in Jesus, God declares me righteous.

As I said at the beginning, I want to try and avoid simply saying: Love each other because God loves you. The qualities of the fruit are the Spirit-birthed *consequences* when disciples take responsibility for nurturing gospel-oriented root beliefs. I want instead to encourage each of us to focus on stewarding these root beliefs.

How then can we nurture this belief?

My Scout leaders always reminded us: "If you get lost, hug a tree. Don't move. We're looking for you. Stand still so we can find you."

Each one of us will answer that question for ourselves according to our unique personalities and situations. Nevertheless, I think there are some common elements. My Scout leaders always reminded us, “If you get lost, hug a tree. Don’t move. We’re looking for you. Stand still so we can find you.” Stop. Look for signs of His presence; be aware of His presence. Listen for His voice. Celebrate His love.

Stop. Look. Listen. Celebrate.

Rest. Pay attention. Learn His voice in Scripture.

Delight and rejoice in His love by learning to delight in the life He has created.

Those are elements of two ancient practices which have helped people of faith abide in God in all kinds of circumstances, and which have thereby sustained the community of faith for generations: keeping Sabbath, and private worship (sometimes called the Daily Office).

The love that comes from God is a choice to seek our well-being. Our role is to become aware of this love and respond to it in faith and delight.

Glory to God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.

Prayers of thanksgiving and intercession:

O LORD, our God,

As the season continues to change and harvests are gathered,
we thank you for the beauty around us,
for brilliant colours, birds flying south, the crackle of fallen leaves, and the rhythms of
this time of year.

We are grateful for your steadfast love amid so much that changes.

This autumn, we also face unpredictable changes as the pandemic continues.

Draw close to those who find the uncertainty unsettling
and help us preserve our connection to you and to each other.

We thank you for all the ways you inspire human minds to create things which improve
the lives of your people.

We are grateful for all the medical efforts taken to manage COVID-19,
and for the scientists testing vaccines. Give them perseverance and success.

Guide politicians and policy makers so that breakthroughs and resources are shared with
the most vulnerable.

We praise you for everyone working to build and maintain healthy communities:

for teachers and librarians, healthcare workers, coaches, construction workers, farmers
and labourers, store clerks and wait staff.

So many have had their workplaces changed and their livelihoods threatened by the pandemic. Give them perseverance and encouragement.
Make us good neighbours to all who serve our community and remind us to say thank you.

We pray for all those who are struggling this autumn, whatever the reason.
We remember before you those facing illness or waiting for treatment...
those who have lost income and worry about winter expenses and shelter...
those who are grieving the loss of someone close...
and those whose mental health is under pressure these days...
Awaken your people around the world to attend to the needs of those at risk in our communities so that they will know your comfort and compassion

In Jesus' name,
Amen.

Hymn #637 "Take my life, and let it be consecrated"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2zt7PzHPqk>

Blessing:

May the Lord bless you and keep you,
the Lord be kind and gracious to you,
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you,
and grant you peace.
Amen.