

November 10, 2019  
Rev. Kerry Smith

Psalm 1                      Rooted, Growing, Reaching  
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Psalm 1                      New Revised Standard Version

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Holiday season has begun! Though, according to the stores, Christmas time started back in August. We are in this celebration season and we continue it today with our 78<sup>th</sup> birthday! We have this rhythm in our lives, with holidays and birthdays. We also have a rhythm with our faith, built on feasts and holidays, Christmas, Easter, Pentecost. It reminds me of the rhythmic life with God. There are times in our life when we feel close to God and sometimes when we feel distant. Times when we are on the mountaintop and times when we are in the valley. One of the mountaintops for me is Christmas Eve when everyone is holding their candles and we are singing Silent Night. I remember one year visiting my mom's church in Houston on Christmas Eve and the candles were in these plastic cups. During the sermon someone dropped their candle and because it was in this plastic cup, you could hear it. Then, someone else dropped their candle, and someone else. The preacher seemed to lose it a bit and pointed at all of us and told us to stop dropping candles! So, he maybe was feeling a bit distant from God while I was feeling close to God.

We heard the first psalm today. Psalms, the prayer book of the Bible, the hymnal of ancient Israel, opens with a poem about morality and how we live and make decisions. In the rhythm of life before you start praying or worshipping, the goal is a changed life. I love Psalm 1's imagery of trees planted by streams of water, yielding fruit with leaves that do not wither. We are reminded of all of the trees here around Greenland Hills, and apparently a creek used to run right through this land where the sanctuary sits right now. Happy are those, blessed are those, who follow God, who listen to God, who pray to God. If you do that, then everything that you do prospers.

When people ask me why Methodists have women preachers, I tell them about John Wesley, the first Methodist. He would preach where the people were, often in open fields. Women started to preach and he was talking with his mom Susanna about these women preachers. Should he stop them? What should he do? His mom asked him if they had fruit. Did their preaching bring people closer to God? Did people come to faith in Christ because of their words? John said yes, and so there are women preachers in the Methodist Church.

Does our church have fruit? Does our church bring people closer to God? Do people come to faith because of Greenland Hills UMC? For 78 years we can answer yes to those questions. A few weeks ago I attended the North Texas clergy retreat. We were led in a conversation called fearless dialogues. One of our activities was to answer five questions, as individuals, and then for our Annual Conference. The questions were: Who are we? Why are we here? What is our gift? How does it feel to be a problem? What must we do to die a good death?

Today as we celebrate the 78th birthday of this family of faith, we know who we are. If you look at the front of the bulletin it tells you our mission, making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. We aspire to be disciples who are moving toward being *Rooted*, and living a life of gratitude and joy. *Growing*, and living a life of perspective and wisdom.

*Reaching*, and living a life of love. Whatever your age or stage, there is a place for you in this place.

We are a reconciling congregation which means we believe in the full inclusion of LGBTQI persons within The United Methodist Church in marriage and in ordination. All are welcome and all are celebrated. We are a church that shares God's love in concrete ways through outreach activities across our city and the world. This is a place that is constantly asking what good is needed in the world and then finding the way to do it. We value creativity, community, mission, music, and we welcome spiritual questions. In our lives we deal with disappointments, joy, uncertainty, the whole bit, and our mind changes all the time as we learn how Jesus would've dealt with those things. We realize that the questions are more important than the answers. Our faith doesn't have pat answers to those why questions.

One of the activities that we did at the clergy retreat was called the long loving look. We paired up, sitting directly across from one another, and looked into each other's eyes for 42 seconds. First, we had to ask permission and once that permission was granted, we took turns. First, person A looked for 42 seconds then person B looked for 42 seconds. As I looked at the person across from me, I said in my head over and over, "I love you." And as I was looked at for 42 seconds, I said in my head over and over, "Thank you." Giving and receiving the mercy of God. The power dynamics fell away. I didn't see someone who I disagreed with or who might have voted differently than I did. I saw a human being with hurts and desires, who had experienced love and pain. I wonder how we can live our lives in 42 second increments, viewing everyone that we see in those 42 seconds as a fellow human being.

The reality that is described in Psalm 1 is centered in God, not ourselves. One of my memories of dating my husband Lee is being at a park in downtown San Antonio. We were in college and I asked him what he wanted out of life. I knew what I wanted. I wanted fame and success and to be important. Lee said that he wanted to be happy. His answer was way better than mine. Happiness is found in the teaching of God. Not in how much you have. The goal of life is praising God. Prosperity comes from being connected to the source of life – God. To be plugged into God, connected to the source of life, we have to focus on God and the richness of generosity and prayer, the pleasure of service and worship, and the leisure of Sabbath rest and silence in the presence of God.

For 78 years people in this church have partnered with God to be a lighthouse to this community. We strive to be a tree planted by streams of water, which yields fruit in its season and its leaves do not wither. I love the first part of the psalm, but then it starts talking about the wicked. Throughout the Psalms, the writers tell the story of the world where the righteous are attacked and the wicked prosper. We see it in our world today. Too often the bad guys win and the good guys don't. We see it in churches. The churches that are for inclusion and that welcome everyone are doing okay but the churches that condemn and judge are doing great.

When the writer of Psalm 1 talks about wickedness, I think they are talking about autonomy, thinking that someone can do life alone. We think that self-sufficiency is a mark of success, that idea that if you want help or need help either from others or from God, it is a sign of weakness. But, we are not meant to live as isolated selves. Wickedness is when we think that we are doing all right by ourselves, that we don't need help. We are called to make connection with God as the source of life, to trust God, and to trust others. One of the richest times in this church's history was when the churches in East Dallas weren't making it individually on their own, so a partnership was created called the East Dallas Cooperative Parish. Churches working together were so much stronger than churches struggling alone.

How can we live lives where we open ourselves up to God's teaching and God's direction? Where we are open to see how God continues to act and be revealed in the lives of people and the life of the world? There are so many people whose lives are transformed because of this place, because of your generosity, because of your commitment to this place being open to all. A few weeks ago I helped the Boy Scout troop that meets here on Tuesday evenings spread mulch on the playground. I talked with one of the boys who was really curious about church. Do you mean anyone can come here? Yes! Do you have to dress in a certain way? No. What do people do? We sing songs, we listen to stories about God's love in the Bible, we pray for one another. Why do you do that? Because we are family and you are welcome, anyone is welcome.

This past Thursday my husband was out of town for work and I was running an errand, and when I tried to start the car, the battery was dead. Really dead. I didn't know who to call or what to do, and was sort of staring around in disbelief. What was I going to do? Then, the driver of the car in front of me said, your battery is dead. I said, I think you are right, I don't know what to do. He asked if I had jumper cables and I said I didn't, though I know what I need for Christmas! He didn't have any jumper cables, but the person next to us let us borrow theirs, and the car in front of me turned around and jumped my car. Regretfully, I didn't ask anyone their name, but I was overwhelmed by the way that people I didn't know came together to help me, someone they didn't know. Don't we all long to know that there's a graciousness at the heart of creation? That people are good. We have a human hunger for goodness. Here in this place we can experience that goodness. In the Methodist Church right now it is easy to get discouraged and hopeless. I'm hopeful because of who you are. All of you show me what radical kindness actually looks like.

In this place, you are seen, you are heard, and together we go change the world. We are planted by a stream of living water, so may we spread the fruit of God's love with everyone that we see. Amen.