

Foothills Congregational Church
United church of Christ
Sunday
461 Orange Ave., Los Altos, CA 94022

The Rev. Melanie Weiner
Mother's Day

May 13, 2018

By the Stream

The Rev. Melanie Weiner

Here we are talking once again about love and seeing the image of trees. The psalmist once again compares people to trees, or at least some to trees and some to chaff. The poetic language, as poetic language often does, gives us the impression that there are two possible opposite paths, two ways to be human, two ways we each can choose. We can be righteous and happy or we can be wicked.

But the psalmist gives us precious little advice on how to know which path is which.

The pastoral images in this psalm present a stark contrast that the ancient hearers would have been better equipped than we are to envision. We have seen trees, of course, growing by streams, tall and green, flourishing, bearing fruit. But how many of you have seen chaff? How many of you know what chaff is? Chaff is the dried papery hull of a grain crop. It is traditionally separated from the grain (remember separating the wheat from the chaff?) by tossing threshed grain into the air. The heavy edible grain falls back down while the wind carries the unneeded chaff off, never to be seen again. To ancient agrarian people, this was a commonplace scene, and the image of chaff floating away, unimportant, unwanted, would have invoked memories and feelings.

The trees too were images that they knew, but their images were different from ours. We see trees everywhere we go. Often they are deep green, filled with heavy luscious fruit, towering overhead, rising almost to the sky. Trees are considerably fewer in number on the hilltops of ancient Israel. They are a dusky shade of green, and they only grow in number near streams. Streams themselves were also important images to people who didn't have hot and cold running water in their homes. Their limited water came from streams or springs, so the stream as a source of nourishment is a deep image itself.

With those images firmly in mind, and assuming we take the righteous path, let's take a look at our lives through the metaphor of the tree rooted by the stream.

We will bear fruit in season. Guess what? Despite what our achievement-oriented culture tells us, we don't need to strive to accomplish great things, check off all our to-dos, be the best at everything or even anything. What we do, who we are, will bear fruit when the time is right. Forcing a tree to produce too much fruit or fruit out of season reduces her lifetime, and dare I say, her quality of life. We can plant a tree in good soil next to a stream, and production will happen, but only when the time is right. So it is in our lives. If we choose the nourishing path, we too will bear fruit in the fullness of time.

Our leaves will not wither. The trees that grow naturally in Israel are almost all evergreen or semi-evergreen, so they have leaves either year-round or if they drop their leaves they do it only when the new shoots are sprouting. A well-nourished tree would have leaves virtually all the time. They are equipped to receive nourishment from the sun, to feed themselves year-round. A bare tree with no leaves wasn't dormant, it was dying. We too, if we meditate on God's teachings and walk the ways of the righteous will have continuous nourishment that keeps us flourishing.

Whatever we produce will thrive. Note that this promise is not that we will thrive, but that whatever we do will thrive. It isn't about each of us as individuals being healthy, wealthy, and wise. Our lives are short, especially when compared to trees and we will experience pain and grief and illness at times, but the fruit we produce, the ways that we affect our community, the gifts of time and talent that we give, the ways we raise and support and encourage children to become strong trees rooted by their streams, that is what the psalm promises will thrive. We may never see the benefit of our fruits, but the benefit will be felt by our families, by the church, by our community.

Remember when Pastor Chris and his family had all the children stand along a blue fabric stream and reach their roots out toward the water and their leaves up toward the sun? This psalm asks us to do the same thing.

Now if only it would tell us how. It does prescribe a way to begin. It calls us to delight in God's teachings and meditate on them day and night. This specifically refers to the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, for the Jewish people, the foundation of faith and practice. That is a lot to take on, but Jesus boils it all down to one thing. Love. Love God. Love your neighbor.

We have been hearing a lot about love this Easter season as we have explored John's gospel and letters. Today we hear about it from Paul, and specifically we get a list of what love is. I love a good list, a checklist to tell me what I need to do or how I need to do it, and this is no exception. All I have to do to love as God would have me love is follow that list. This is the path of righteousness, the path of justice. If you open the Bible to this passage about love and turn back a page to 1 Corinthians chapter 12, you'll see another list, a list of the gifts of the spirit--prophecy, working of miracles, speaking in tongues and more--the sort of gifts that appear to be signs that one is filled with God and going down the right path. Then there is an exhortation to share those gifts with the church, but then Paul wraps up that narrative by saying "And I will show you a still more excellent way."

The more excellent way is love.

Love is the path. Love is the answer to how do we know which path is righteous and which is wicked.

Now trust me, I'm not saying that the right path is always easy to discern; the psalm makes it clear that it isn't, that it involves meditating on it day and night, that we must always pay attention, but if we can look at everything that we do through the lens of love we will find the way. The psalm may hint to you that perfection is required, that if you take a step down the wrong path you are doomed, but read it again. It says the way of the wicked is doomed, and it promises that God will watch over the way of the righteous,

We aren't called to love perfectly. This past week leading up to Mother's Day has been an adventure. My patience has been tried, and I am worn out from parenting my bunch. I have definitely not been an example of flawless grace and poise. But this bit of poetry came across my desk just in time to remind me that looking perfect is not what we are here for:

Dear Human

By Courtney Walsh

Dear Human: You've got it all wrong.
You didn't come here to master unconditional love.
That is where you came from and where you'll return.
You came here to learn personal love.
Universal love. Messy love. Sweaty love.
Crazy love. Broken love. Whole love.
Infused with divinity. Lived through the grace of stumbling.
Demonstrated through the beauty of... messing up. Often.
You didn't come here to be perfect. You already are.

You came here to be gorgeously human. Flawed and fabulous.
And then to rise again into remembering.
But unconditional love? Stop telling that story.
Love, in truth, doesn't need ANY other adjectives.
It doesn't require modifiers.
It doesn't require the condition of perfection.
It only asks that you show up. And do your best.
That you stay present and feel fully.
That you shine and fly and laugh and cry
and hurt and heal and fall and get back up
and play and work and live and die as YOU.
It's enough. It's Plenty.

On this Mother's Day, this day in which we pay special attention to the people who have mothered us, who have nurtured us and nourished us and loved us, let us focus on love, on life that thrives by running streams of clean water, on showing up and being authentic. Let us seek the right paths, stand tall by the stream, share our fruits widely, and love one another.