

OPENING UP

September 23, 2018

Pentecost 18

[Psalm 1:1-3](#)

[Mark 9:30-37](#)

(prayer)

The [Revised Common Lectionary](#) schedule of weekly bible readings usually includes four suggested passages for each Sunday - typically **two from the Old Testament** (a Psalm and a historical/prophetic reading) and **two from the New Testament** (a gospel reading and one from Acts, Revelation or one of the letters).

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My own *personal discipline* is... that I like to plan Sunday church services around the RCL. I have a few reasons why:

1. takes less planning, as I have a starting point;
2. forces me allow the worship and preaching plans to be based on the centrality of the biblical texts - I am proud to call myself a bible-based preacher;
3. the RCL is used in many other United Churches as well as churches of other denominations (Lutheran, Anglican, Catholic), so if people are visiting SDUC or if you are worshipping elsewhere, there might be something that feels familiar;
4. our Sunday School has (at times) used a lectionary based curriculum - allowing those in the sanctuary and in the Sunday School to be studying the same readings on the same Sunday; ...but...
5. *Primarily*, using a lectionary keeps me from relying only on my favorite parts of the bible. It challenges me to focus on texts that I might otherwise avoid. It helps keep me from falling into the trap of *proof-texting*... it lets the bible speak to me before I speak, rather than looking for a passage to support what I have already decided to say.

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Some churches that use the RCL, use all four suggested readings every week (either as a denominational requirement or by choice).

You May have noticed that, I (typically) only have one or two passages included in the service each week (and sometimes I adjust which verses are read).

Basically, my pattern is that if I am *not* referring to a passage in the service somewhere, I usually exclude it.

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For some reason, I don't focus all that often on the suggested psalm reading. To be fair, the RCL usually selects psalm readings that somehow relate to the other OT reading... so, I might be prone to select the non-psalm Hebrew Bible passage.

In fact, I was close to doing that *again* this week. The suggested OT reading is a familiar from [Proverbs chapter 31](#) that provides several examples of a very capable person who avoids idleness and works for the good of others. Proverbs 31 is worth a read; I'll put a link in my sermon notes on the website.

But **today**, I want to begin with the psalms.

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The first of the 150 Psalms (in the longest book of the Old Testament) is a song of inspiration. It is speaking to the people of Israel hoping that it will inspire righteous living... i.e. adhering to the precepts of the Hebrew law: the Torah.

Actually, the language of the psalm is *more* than following the law... but, **delighting** in the law. One can follow guidelines and expectations out of a sense of duty or a fear of getting in trouble. But the psalmist writes that *blessed are those who delight in God's law*.

Psalm One paints a beautiful metaphor for how the blessing of God feels.

The upside to delighting the Torah - *the psalmist said* - is that the people are sustained by God, like a tree whose roots are fed by a reliable source of water.

*They are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.*

To me, this is a peaceful, relaxing, feel-good image. I compare it to the first verses of the well known 23rd Psalm:

*The Lord makes me lie down in green pastures;
leads me beside still waters;
and restores my soul.*

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Perhaps it has been the wet and fluffy transition into autumn this year, but I find myself drawn to the images of relaxing at water's edge surrounded by green pastures and trees in full leaf.

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The psalm's metaphor is: we are the trees; and... God is the steady, reliable stream, in whom we take root.

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You don't have to be a skilled arborist to know that water is not the only ingredient for a tree to enjoy a vibrant life.

But a tree's life does start and end with water. Without water, the tree will wither.

The water provides the necessary moisture to allow the nutrients from the soil to flow through the tree. With the basic growth these nutrients provide the tree will sprout leaves to collect the sun's light and energy, combine it with Carbon Dioxide from the air to 'photosynthesize' food for the tree.

Life.

Breath.

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Coming back to the metaphor in the psalm... delighting in the ways of God gives us the very Breath of Life!

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Considering the possibility of a divine creator is to build a system of beliefs on a profession that we have life because of God.

The psalmist invites us:

1. to pause in awe at the providence of God, and
2. to live like this awesome realization makes a difference.

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To live out the Torah was not just to offer praise and prayer to God, but to live as part of a healthy and compassionate community. The precepts of the law go far beyond how to show appreciation to God; they also include how to treat others, how to conduct business, how to live in harmony with the cycles of the natural world.

You may remember that the NT gospel writers record that Jesus summed up all of God's commandments by quoting two passages from the Torah: *The Lord is our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. And, you shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself.*

I suspect that Jesus would have interpreted Psalm One's *delighting in the Torah* to mean that one is to love both God and humanity.

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We only need to look as far as today's reading from Mark to see Jesus living out that message.

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First... a bit of context.

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Last week, the RCL had us listening to the [end of chapter eight](#)... where Jesus asking his disciples: *who do you say that I am?* What followed was a conversation about whether Peter should himself as following Jesus who is the victorious *messiah* or the vulnerable *son of man*. The question the disciples were asked to consider was "Are you willing to follow Jesus even if his path leads to suffering, even death? Will you take up your cross and follow?"

What happens in Mark chapter nine between last week's and this week's readings is that:

- Peter, James and John shared a fleeting vision of Jesus shinning in divine glory and obviously connected to the prophetic history of the faith. They wanted to stay and protect the moment, but found themselves coming down the mountain, not sure what to make of the experience.
- Then when the four of them rejoined the other disciples, Jesus learned that they had (surprisingly) been not been able to heal a child who suffered from a lifetime of violent seizures. Jesus, now that he was back, was able to perform the healing.

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So, the context leading up to what we heard today is that Jesus had been inviting his followers to consider whether they could pay the cost of truly committed discipleship. They wanted to believe that they did *have what it takes*, but then the inner circle found themselves confused about the full nature of Jesus and the rest of them seemed unworthy to minister in Jesus' name.

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Into this context of soul searching and confusion, the disciples turned on each other. At least, that (partly) is how I interpret the conversation they had on the way back to Capernaum: an argument on

who, among them, is the greatest.

I imagine they were trying to figure out which one of them was *not* to blame for their troubles.

Just a few days earlier, the disciples had witnessed a child unable to control its seizures and the helplessness of its father (who society expects to protect his vulnerable child) who could do nothing. The disciples came face to face with their own vulnerability and limits, too.

They viewed vulnerability as a weakness and so they tried to clothe themselves in an illusion of greatness.

I can understand why they wanted to *plead the fifth* when Jesus asked about their travelling conversation.

A conversation about *who is the greatest* is actually a conversation about *who is NOT great*. It is not a conversation the disciples wanted to defend, so they stayed silent.

Even without an explicit admission, Jesus gives them a visual parable to describe how following Jesus invites them to view greatness.

Jesus took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes [God] who sent me'

As I learned from the *Seasons of the Spirit FUSION* resource, Children in the world of Jesus' time (although important within their families), were almost considered 'non-persons' in the wider society. The truth is that children were often the first victims of famine, disease, or wars.

A child is - by nature - a perfect example of vulnerability. Jesus preached to his disciples that true greatness would be known by embracing that which is vulnerable.

I would take that one step further. Our true greatness is only knowable when **we** embrace and admit **our own** vulnerability.

I think *that* was part of what Jesus was saying to Simon Peter last week by opening that disciple up to the possibility that Jesus was *more* than a king among men: an attitude Peter held that Jesus said came from focusing on human things rather than divine things.

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A *divine message* that Jesus highlighted in today's story is... that welcoming the vulnerable is among the greatest things a disciple can do.

To be great: be a servant to all.

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The formal mission statement of St. David's United Church is "to welcome all to participate in its nurturing Christian community and to inspire its people to serve others as Christ taught!"

This congregation's mission comprises five key action words (Welcome, Participate, Nurture, Inspire, Serve) as a response to the teachings of Jesus. The first and fifth on this list pick up the language of Jesus message in today's Mark reading: **welcome** and **serve**.

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The challenge facing each of us (who identify this congregation as our church home) is... *how well are we doing practicing what we preach?*

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That's actually a good touchstone for everyone, whatever your belief system is.

*How well are you doing
practicing what you preach?*

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I am not going to offer my evaluation of that question today. It is a question that all healthy churches (and people of faith) must come back to on a regular basis.

But I will claim that I fervently believe that we should never expect anyone or any church to be getting it right, 100% of the time.

Perfection is not the goal.

A humble approach to servanthood is.

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My hope is that, (more often than not) are I/we living within the bookends of our mission statement: the call to *welcome* and the call to *serve*?

I do see the five actions of SDUC's mission as being in a logical order.

- It begins with the ability to authentically **welcome**.
- Being welcomed is essential to **participation**.
- A person's willingness to participate is bound to be enhanced when they (themselves) feel **nurtured**, cared for and valued.
- And, finally, it makes sense that the more of ourselves that we open up to our connections and relationships with the community of faith, the greater the possibility that we will be **inspired** to

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serve beyond ourselves.

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*Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. Service looks like this, Jesus said:
welcome the vulnerable in my name.*

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Jesus' hallmark of truly great discipleship is to open up the widest possible welcome.
Mission can naturally flow from that.

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Like the tree living by the stream, whose leaves spread out wide to welcome the energy and warmth of the sun, as we open up, we are better able bring in the spirit's energy and warmth.
With renewed energy, growth happens.

In faith, we are intended to be continuously growing and evolving in our understanding and appreciation for holy presence in our midst.

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As the prayer attributed to St. Francis reminds us... may we seek to console, to understand, to love; it is in giving that we receive.

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Let us pray:

Loving God, hold us close and open us up to the ones who might see you through us. Amen.

#560VU "O Master, Let Me Walk With Thee"