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Psalm 1 & John 17:6-19  
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As the news cycles shift, there's both freedom and anxiety in the air. And it makes me wonder about this past year and our nation, our state, our community's life together.

One of the great ironies of history is that in times of hardship and adversity, people tend to pull together, work for the common good, and reassure themselves that tomorrow will be better. But in times of relative prosperity or comfort, we each tend our own gardens as rugged individualists. We view government as little more than an arena where we send gladiators to fight for a bigger piece of the pie for us. And those of us for whom life is pretty good become pessimistic, afraid of losing ground. The significance of this is that whenever the upper and middle classes become pessimistic, we always stop caring for the poor.

It is striking to me how there is so much despair in the midst of unprecedented freedoms. That caring for our neighbors, or not, has at times turned into fights over personal freedom.

The message we have heard from the days of our youth is that we are free to be whatever we want to be, unencumbered by old traditions. "It is up to you," we heard, "to choose your own future, decide where you will go to school, what type of work you will do, with whom you will spend your life, and what you will value. No one can make a judgment on your choices. It's your life. You get to live it as you want."

Whenever it was that we dismantled all traditional claims upon the individual's life, we were assuming that everyone inherently knew who he or she was and what they wanted in life. But the terrible irony is that, by removing the individual from great traditions, we only made it

impossible to know ourselves or our purposes in life. That has left us each with the impossible burden of trying to create a good life.

The way we think we can create a good life is by using our freedom to make choices. We tried one major in school and when that didn't work out, we chose another. After school, we chose a first job and then moved on to another and several others after that. We chose to move to one town after another, from one relationship to another, and achievement after achievement— all in hopes of finding a life we can call good.

There is nothing wrong with making changes in life, but the subtle hope we often have is that through these choices we can get a different life. But eventually the fleeting years make it harder and harder to start over, and then the only mission we have left is to convince ourselves that the life we have is good enough. As our psalmist today claims, we are like chaff blowing in the wind.

I read somewhere that there are more than 3,000 Halls of Fame in America. Charles, Illinois has a hall of fame for pickle packers. The Accountants' Hall of Fame is at Ohio State University. And the Checkers Hall of Fame is in Petal, Mississippi. As one commentator said, there's pretty much a hall of fame for everyone but Pete Rose. The implication of this is that you will never construct a famous life unless you find a niche small enough in which to become a stunning success. You may not make it to the Football or Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, but you can be famous for something. How about checkers? What a mission for life! We are but chaff blowing in the wind.

The alternative the Psalmist presents us is to be a tree planted by flowing water. That is what worship is all about. The flowing water is the great biblical tradition that began long before us, but it is now flowing past our moment in history. To plant yourself by this stream is to come to worship, week after week, where you are reminded that your identity is not a construction or choice but an inheritance. This includes the high drama of such life-shaping events as the following: Abraham's decision

to leave comfort to find a blessing, Jacob's dark night of wrestling with God, the Hebrews' long meandering journey through the wilderness, David's fight with Goliath, Nehemiah's dedication to rebuild the walls of the holy city, James' and John's abandonment of their fishing nets to follow Jesus, Peter's terrible moment of denying Jesus and his moment of hope in discovering a risen Christ, Paul's discovery that he had been wrong about Jesus and his commission to apostolicity, and John's beautiful revelation of the end of history when there are no more tears or dying.

That's your story. You can find yourself on every page of this biblical story. Our worship liturgy is designed to help you do this by weaving the story of your life into the biblical narrative every week. That is how we know who we are and what we are about. And that is how we make a world of difference during our short journey through life.

The best part of the story is the chapters that describe how Jesus is the God who has come to be with us, how he died to forgive us for our sins, rose to give us a new life, ascended to continue his work of creating a new kingdom on earth, and how the Holy Spirit engrafts you into Christ's life and calls you to his mission. Every time we renew our own baptismal vows, when a child or adult passes through the waters of the sacrament – like Valerie will today, we remember who we are and that we live to participate in Christ's mission in our corner of the earth. That's what liturgy, or the order of worship, is always designed to do.

The word for liturgy in the Greek is formed by two words – *laos*, which means people or public and *ergon*, which means work. Thus, liturgy originally meant public work. Remember, before these words were made sacred, they had a common meaning. When someone built roads, entered military or public service, did charitable work or cared for the poor, they were doing what was called "liturgy," public work. So when people first heard the Church describe its worship with the word liturgy, they knew it meant that Christians worshiped God for the good of the public. There was a different word that was used to describe private, personal rituals.

That was *orgia*, from which we have derived the word orgy. The only thing that keeps our worship from digressing into an orgy of private religious feelings is if we leave our time of worship renewed in our identity and our mission.

We don't worship for our sake; we worship for the sake of the world. Worship is not just about finding a little sanctuary as if this were little more than your corner of the boxing ring to which you retreat battered, and bitten, by your foes. Worship is the place we come to encounter the Word of God in the midst of so many blasphemous words that deceive us with lies saying, "You are on your own in this harsh world. You have to demand what you want. Don't let them take something from you." If we have entered the presence of God and heard God's identity-renewing story again, we remember there is no "them." There is just "us": rich and poor, black and white, male and female, gay and straight, young and old, sinner and, well, sinner. It is not them you need to fear. It is fear that you need to fear because it makes you less than human. Fear makes it impossible to care, and as our creation story explains, humans care by their design.

Our world today is longing for a new reason to believe in a hopeful future. We long to a return to normalcy – or at least we want to be back in the pews, to socialize, and to be comfortable around others. We look for leaders and for answers, about the pandemic and about what's next. Yet I believe that real change will come when the people who worship rediscover their holy visions of our life together. We don't transform a society by starting with the leaders. We start with the led— with you and me. A historian summarized Lyndon Johnson's presidency by saying he was not the best of presidents, but then again we were not the best of peoples. It is the worship liturgy that can create the people, who can create the leaders to work for justice.

From where did Mother Theresa get her vision for caring for the discarded masses? From where did Dr. Martin Luther King get his great dream of a color-blind society? From where did Frederick Douglas,

Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Tubman get their holy intolerance of slavery? From the visionary churches that created both them and the people they led.

We can be that kind of church. We can be a tree planted by flowing waters “whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.” Or we can be just one more self-absorbed, pessimistic institution. Just chaff blowing in the wind. It is our choice. And we make it every Sunday when we come to this place and when we leave it.

Friends, remember that This last hour of worship was completed not for your sake. It was for the sake of the people you will meet this week.  
Amen.