

# “Planted Near Life-Giving Water”

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## John 17:6-19

*I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for the words that you gave to me I have given to them, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. I am asking on their behalf; I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours. All mine are yours, and yours are mine; and I have been glorified in them. And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, so that they also may be sanctified in truth.*

## Psalm 1

*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 judgement,  
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.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power and workings of your Holy Spirit. I pray that you would take the words and images that each of us carry within, the words we've offered in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read from scripture, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform these words and images into the word of Christ, the living word that feeds our faith, that guides our lives, that invites us to serve and love. We ask that this word would do its work within us, among us, and through us and we ask this in the faithful name of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

For most of my Christian journey, especially since I became a minister and learned that there was something called

Christian spirituality, the guiding metaphor for life was that of the spiritual journey of someone who was transverse the valley of the shadow of death trying to get to the other side, or like the people of Israel trying to escape bondage in the place that you are before you know God's love, and care, and grace for you, then wandering in the wilderness for 40 years, not sure if God's blessing is with you, wondering if God will provide for you, being led right up to that point where you're ready to cross over into the land of promise, the land where it's flowing with milk and honey, the land where there is goodness, and grace, and mercy, where you can plant vineyards, and build houses, and start families. All of these journey things lead to us understanding the spiritual life as a spiritual journey. And to me, it made sense for a long time, a sinner being saved by grace, striving to be a better Christian, striving to learn what it means to love our neighbors, or ourselves, or to serve God wholeheartedly.

The scriptures are, in a sense, replete with these images of journey. When Abram was called by God, he was invited to go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you, I will make great your name, I will bless those who bless you, those who curse you, I will curse. And in that blessing, God says, "I will go with you, so go, Abram." And he was 75 when he departed his homeland to begin his journey. One of my favorite passages in all of scripture is Jeremiah 6:16, "Thus," says the Lord, "Stand at the crossroads and look and ask for the ancient paths where the good way lies and walk in it and find rest for your soul." Again, the metaphor of journey, coming to that point in your life where there is a crossroads and standing, and asking, and praying, and discerning, "Okay, Lord, which way do I go?" And once you learn of it, walk in it and it will be easy and you will find rest for your souls. Or maybe you remember that in the gospels, our Lord says that, "I am the way, the truth, and the life," and calls his disciples again and again to, "Follow me." So this notion of journey is a perfectly legitimate notion of what it is for us to be faithful Christians.

But I've started to wonder about that image or that metaphor. I've started to wonder if maybe the advertising world has sort of crept into our understanding of Christian faith and that what we hear often is, "Just keep striving, keep working, keep trying. You're almost there." In fact, our own reformed theology seems to remind us of that because we believe that, this side of heaven, we cannot be perfected. In a sense, our whole life as Christians is that wilderness journey leading us to the promise land that when we take our last breath, we will enter into God's heavenly banquet. So that all we do on this side of heaven is strive and wait, trying to get somewhere where we can be embraced by God's promise.

This past week, the Board of Pensions invited 30 ministers, including myself, to go on a retreat. They flew us into Asheville, North Carolina, stuck us on a bus and sent us to Canton, which is about an hour away, to a place called Logan Lake. Logan Lake was a corporate retreat for a big paper company that went under when it went into bankruptcy. The Episcopal church said, "Hey, we like that property. We'll take it, and turn it into a retreat center." And so there's this beautiful river that flows into this big lake with cabins on one half of the lake, half on the other. They added a dining room area, a space for worship and administration building, but really, it's just a bunch of cabins in the woods by a lake. Yes, I had to suffer for Jesus [laughter]. And while we were there, part of what the Board of Pensions is getting us to focus on is our wellness - emotional wellness, spiritual wellness, financial wellness, physical wellness, and vocational wellness. Really, they concentrated most of their energy on two of those things. Financial wellness, since it's the Board of Pensions. They told us, "When you retire, you're going to be okay. Stop worrying. And then the other part that they spent most of their time talking about was vocational wellness. And my sense was that there was a bias in the presentation, that all 30 ministers had gathered at the time when each of them was considering leaving their current situation and moving to a new church. So we did things that talked about our nimble skills. I didn't even know I was nimble until I went. We talked about-- somebody actually used the phrase, "skill jiu-jitsu." I'm like, "Okay. Timeout."

But the sense was that you're leaving one church and you're going to the next. And so we did skills inventories and thought about how the fit is between us and where we serve and on, and on, and on, and then we got into small groups to talk about all of these things. There were four of us in my small group, pastors all about the same age, and we sat in a circle and one of them started talking and said, "I am so glad to be here." And I thought to myself, "Yeah. Me too. I've heard there's trout in the lake [laughter]. Now if I could just find a fishing pole, I'd be really happy." But he said, "No, I'm so glad that I'm here because I've been struggling in my current situation. I've been there about 10 years. I don't know if it's time to leave or time to stay. I need to rediscover a call in my current situation." And he shared about his church and his situation and I thought, "Yeah. I get it. You need to figure out if you're going to stay or if you're going to go." The next person who shared is a pastor who has just been at his church for a little over a year and who's pretty sure that in his discernment process, he may have misinterpreted a few things. And he talked lovingly about his past church

and questioning about his current church and wondering, "Okay, Lord, what do you have in store for me?" The third person was in a relatively new call and a nice community seemed pretty stable, but he wasn't sure and he actually said these words, "We're thinking about putting down roots in this community."

And then it came my turn. And I said, "I've got to be honest, I don't have any sense of being called anywhere else than where I serve now. And if they'll put up with me for another decade or so, I want to retire from Kirkwood." And so the question is how do I find wholeness in my current situation? And we talked and discussed all about that. So we have this discussion in this this group, and then after that, there's a break. I head to the boathouse, rampage the place, find a fly rod with a spinning reel and a couple spinners. I tie them on, I head to the stream, or the river, creek, whatever it is, I cast it in. About four casts later, I catch a trout, and I think, "It's been years since I've caught a fish." I unhook it, let it go, and I sit down on a rock. And for some reason, while I'm sitting at that rock, I remember something that Barbara Brown-Taylor said during a class I took at Columbia Seminary. She said something along the lines of, "I am so sick and tired of the spiritual life being considered a journey, that I always need to get somewhere else in order to be happy or okay or feel blessed. I just want to be where I am and have God's promise and love and grace fill me where I live."

As I walked back up to the dining hall, getting ready for lunch, it dawned on me that when I got back from this experience, I needed to preach, on Mother's Day no less. And so when I found a wifi connection, I went onto my phone and I looked up the passages that we would be using for today, and I realized that I would be preaching on Psalm 1. "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 on the law of the Lord, and on his law, they will 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 they do, they prosper." I spent the rest of the week considering what it might mean for us as Christians to lay aside for a season the idea of spiritual journey and take up the idea of spiritual rootedness, of being planted in a place, a good and life-giving place, and trusting that God's grace is at work, knowing that we don't need to strive harder, or go somewhere else, or even get to the end of our life to taste God's goodness - that God's goodness is at work in us right now. And that our job is to trust that and to bear fruit.

So as all this stuff is swirling around and I think, "Oh, there's a sermon - I can preach it when I get home," I ran across this passage in Jeremiah that I remembered from a time ago. And I think it fits to those who consider life a journey, or maybe even as a struggle, something that they need to do. And I think it invites us into realizing the blessing that is already ours through faith in Jesus Christ. It's in the 17th chapter of the Prophet of Jeremiah. "Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord. They are like a shrub in the desert and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness in an uninhabited salt land. But blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes - its leaves shall stay green. In the year of drought, it is not anxious and it does not cease to bear fruit." I think about all of the young people who go away to college to start their careers and then, at some point, realize, "Oh, it's time to move back to Kirkwood." And on a very personal note, I realized that there's a decent chance my grandchildren will go to Kirkwood High. There is something mighty powerful about putting down your roots in a place and knowing that it's good. We have that privilege here in our community, but even more important, as Christians, we can put our roots down into the gospel of Jesus Christ, the life-giving water and it will nourish us and feed us, and we will not be anxious when there's a drought, and our leaves will stay green, and, brothers and sisters, we will continue to bear fruit. And for that, I am grateful. Amen.