

13th Sunday after Pentecost Sept. 8 2019

Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Psalm 1, Luke 14:25-33

“Happy are they whose delight is in the Torah (the scripture) of the Lord,. Who meditate on God’s teaching day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, resilient in the midst of adverse weather with leaves that do not wither.”

This comes from our reading of the first Psalm. It reminds me of Luther’s explanation of the Third Commandment, to remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy. This means we are to fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and God’s Word but would rather keep it holy and gladly hear and learn it.

To remember the Sabbath is to plant the tree of our life beside the waters of the scripture and preaching and drink deeply...Why? So that we might bear good fruit...and so that we might become resilient in the face of the adversity that will come our way.

This Rally Sunday we celebrate these parents who are living out their promise to provide this drink for their children. So that the tree of their life might grow deep roots in God’s Word, be nourished so that they might bear good fruit. So that when adversity in life comes (and it will come will it not?) they will have the strength and resilience to come through it whole...ready to bear fruit again.

This Rally Sunday we affirm the fact that we all need to continue to drink from this river. So, we have Sunday School, we reinvigorate our emphasis on gathering

around that which waters our tree of life; Jesus Christ, present to us in Word read, sung, and proclaimed, and in the bread we eat and wine we drink.

The tree described in Psalm 1 is an apt metaphor for the life of faith. Jesus himself has already used it four times in this gospel, to describe those disciples who follow him, “These are the ones who are good soil...who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.” And in contrast to those who do not bear good fruit...who will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.

Harsh words. Almost as harsh as what Jesus says to the crowds following him today. Hate your family. Carry your cross. Give up all your possessions. It doesn't get much better when we understand that the word translated as hate, in the Greek, is not an emotion “I hate you” but talks about an affirmative choice. I choose this thing so that means that I cannot give as much time/attention/energy to that other thing. I “hate” it.

But let's put it in even more context. If you look at the text just before this in Luke, Jesus tells the parable of a man who invites many people to a great dinner, but when he sends his slave to say, “Soups on!” he is met with only excuses. “Dude, I just bought some land to build a new house, I've got to take care of it first. Sorry!” “Yeah, about that... I just got a new combine and I need to get it ready and try it out for harvest. Sorry!” “Um...I just got married and need to attend to my new wife. Sorry!”

Jesus turns on this crowd who has been following him because he is the new IT person. He is the one trending on twitter, the one who draws crowds because it is cool and interesting to watch him work. What he says is not anything new, but

it does put the idea of discipleship into stark relief. Especially when you think about that previous text.

You follow me folks, Jesus says, you put me first. No excuses. No, just bought a new house, got a new combine, need to get the kids to soccer, go hunting, have time with my family. It is the same thing his Father demands if you think about it. The First Commandment is...? You shall have no other gods before me. We are to fear, love and trust God alone. It is an echo of what Jesus has already said about the greatest of the commandments. To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself.

God, in whatever part of the Trinity you are dealing with, demands first fruits. Of our loyalties, of our lives, of our possessions. Period.

Is this because God has an ego trip? By no means!

It is because God loves us and knows that only in God's Word come to us in Jesus can we live the life we were created to live. Only when we are watered by God's own Word, in the Body of Christ that is God's community on earth, only then can we bear good fruit. Fruit that will last and give life to others. Only then can we have life. True life. Fuller and more abundant.

In our reading from Deuteronomy, Moses, speaking to the Israelites just as they are on the cusp of entering the promised land puts it this way, "I call heaven and earth to witness ... that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him."

So, what does this look like, this life of discipleship?

Brothers and sisters, you already know what it looks like to make one thing a priority over all other things, because we do it all the time. It looks like the person who sacrifices friendships, free time, dating, to focus on athletic prowess and success. It looks like the lawyer or stockbroker who works 80 plus hours a week for mounds of money and things at the expense of family and relationships.

God says, put me first. Over and above everything else. Put attending to my word and sacrament over things that ultimately do not lead to life. Put loving your neighbor, the one in need, over your political leanings. Put me first. And the promise is... you will have life. Fuller and more abundant. Because unlike those other things (those other gods of success, wealth, power, leisure), God desires that you have good relationships with family and friends. God desires that you re-create yourself. God desires that your life would be full. But to do that, God needs to come...first.

We are God's creation. In fact, we bear the image of God. There is much conversation about what that might mean, but I think the image of God lies in the fact that we can create. That God has granted us an intellect like no other on earth and we have a shadow of the creative power of God. But, as the Garden of Eden story and so much since that time shows, when we drink from sources other than the river of God's Word... death will eventually come for us. Look at how we affect creation. Almost every time we seek to improve it, in some way we damage creation. When we think we have the power over life and death, death still wins. Because too often the impulse of that improvement comes from us, not from God.

We are God's creation, and in the waters of Baptism God has claimed us as God's children. In these very real ways, we are God's and God does not like to share. Because God knows that anything else we turn to will lead to death, in one form or another. Because that is not who we are created to be, and because they are not the source of our life and being in the first place.

Brothers and sisters. God doesn't want you in worship on a regular basis because God needs God's ego stroked or to inconvenience you. God wants you here because when you do not despise God's Word but rather drink deeply from it... you will bear good fruit, you will grow and God wants that! When you receive the healing that comes from God's forgiveness... you will be freed, and you will bear good fruit, you will grow, and God wants that! When you are surrounded by the love of God found in your fellow believers... you will be healed, you will bear good fruit, you will grow, and God wants that! When you drink from the river God provides... you will plant your roots deep and when adversity comes (and it will come brothers and sisters), you will be able to weather it and go on bearing fruit.

My siblings in Christ this is not about salvation, but it is about life. As one theologian put it, When you get married, you don't earn that love, it is a gift given freely...but you work on that relationship every day...not to earn the love but because you love the one who you are married to. Because when you do the relationship just gets better!

God has claimed our lives through Jesus Christ. We're married. What kind of marriage do you want to have? A sham of a marriage where other people and things always come first? Or one that is focused first on the beloved, not to the exclusion of everything else, but with clear priority over everything else.

The life lived in this relationship with God is not a burden. It can be difficult, for sure. With the loss of privilege the Christian faith has in this world there will be more things that will demand that they come first. This is most readily apparent when you look at parents of school age children. Sports, especially travel sports, show choir, and band will vie for primacy. The best of Netflix and binge watching calls to us, and we leave God's word found in scripture untouched. The lure of family just a few hours away, or the cabin by the river pulls us from the assembly of believers for whole seasons.

Most of these things are good and can be good for us. But when the sports are done, will the roots of the tree of faith in your child be deep enough to keep them when trials come? When the Netflix show is done, will that sustain and guide you when you hit that next moral dilemma. And if it does, will it lead you to life?

There is room in our lives for these things, but only when we put drinking from the River of Life that is God first.

We are at the start of another program year, a chance to begin again to drink deeply from scripture, from the Word of God found here in corporate worship. A chance to fill our living with a focus on God. Even as we work, even as we play. For when we do that. We will have life.

It is hard work. It is messy work...there is no formula for this. But when we do, our roots will grow deep. We will produce good fruit. And we will have life.

God loves you, enough to send his Son to die so that we may live. Let us together reaffirm our commitment to putting God first, so that we might bear good fruit- loving God and loving our neighbor with all that we are. And have life fuller and more abundant.