

“By Day”

Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, February 9, 2014

New Testament Lesson: John 4:5-15

Old Testament lesson: Psalm 42:1-3

In the devotional booklet the Upper Room, Ellen Bergh tells of traveling through Oregon on Amtrak’s Coast Starlight train. The train “was filled with excited passengers, craning their necks to enjoy the ... scenery as (it) rolled through green forests. A shining lake gleamed through the trees, and cheerful conversation filled the air.” Suddenly, the light, airy feeling was gone, like a candle blown out in a draft as they entered a tunnel. Ellen expected the sun to reappear quickly, but it only got darker. The happy sounds were a thing of the past. The longer they traveled in the tunnel, the harder it was to remain calm without any visual cues to reassure them. Even the movement of the train seemed to fall away into pitch darkness. And then when they came out of the tunnel, laughter and relief filled the compartment. “My life in Christ, writes Ellen, is like that unforgettable train ride. Events may plunge me into darkness where I have no clues to sense the Lord’s presence. Yet I can trust God is with me even when I can’t see what lies ahead.”¹

Trusting in God even when we can’t see what lies ahead. How do we do that, given the complexities of our lives? Well, it requires a certain openness to discovery.

When the Samaritan woman in our NT lesson approaches Jesus, she displays an openness to discovery, rather than certainty about all the answers. The Samaritan woman is asked by Jesus to give him a drink from the well, and she asks, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria,” when Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans. And Jesus answers her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.”

Well now, that’s pretty easy – ***ask and ye shall receive***. If life were only that easy! Well it is, it can be, that easy. Life can be so much easier if we would just ask Jesus – when in need of comfort, or direction, or provision, or healing – and then simply receive what he has to offer us, life would be so much easier.

Blogger and Internet author Marc Chernoff gives the following examples of how hard we work at complicating our lives.²

¹ Ellen Bergh, “What Lies Ahead?” Upper Room, September/October 1993, 65.

² <http://www.marcandangel.com/2012/01/08/28-ways-to-stop-complicating-your-life/>

“Stop berating yourself for being a work in progress,” “Start embracing it! Because being a work in progress doesn’t mean you’re not good enough today.” “Stop doing immoral things simply because you can. Start being honest with yourself and everyone else. Don’t cheat. Be faithful. Be kind. Do the right thing! It is a less complicated way to live.” “Stop spending time with negative people. Relationships should help you, not hurt you. Surround yourself with people who reflect the person you want to be. Choose friends who ... make your day a little brighter simply by being in it.” “Stop trying to change people. Start accepting people just the way they are. In most cases, it’s impossible to change them anyway, and – (I love this) – it’s rude to even try.” “Stop being dramatic. Start spending less time gossiping about problems and more time helping yourself and others solve them.” “Stop trying to be everything to everyone. Start focusing on being everything to someone.” (That’s a pretty good one, too.) “Stop blaming others. Start accepting responsibility for everything in your life. Either you own your problems, or they will own you.” And finally, “stop giving what you don’t want to receive; start practicing the golden rule! If you want love, give love. If you want friends, be friendly. If you want money, provide value. It works. It really is this simple,” according to Marc Chernoff.

But actually, uncomplicating our lives is anything but simple. It’s quite easy – we just need to do it – but doing it is not simple; it’s oh so complicated. It’s hard to take responsibility for our part when we could easily blame others, life is dramatic, too many people we know are negative, and surely we can change them if only we push harder. As for us, we hate being a work in progress, and being too honest, we’ll that just leaves us too vulnerable.

Take for example the story of the three contractors. They each get called to bid on a government job – fixing a fence – and arrive at the same time. One is from Kansas City, Kansas, the other from Kansas City, MO., and the third is from Independence. Sizing up the job, the guy from KCMO takes out his tape measure and pencil, does some calculations, and says, “I figure the job will run about \$900 – \$400 for materials, \$400 for my crew, and \$100 profit for me.” Next, the one from Independence takes out his tape measure and pencil, marks down some figurers, and says, “Looks like I can do this job for \$700 -- \$300 for materials, \$300 for my crew, and \$100 profit for me.” Finally the government-job manager turns to the guy from KCK. Without batting an eye, that contractor says, “\$2,700.” “You didn’t even measure like the other guys!” says the manager. “How did you come up with such a high figure?” “Easy,” he says, “\$1,000 for me, \$1,000 for you, and we hire the guy from Independence.”

That might be the easy way to get through life, but it’s no way to get through life with God on your side. Having faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior means we do the right thing regardless of the outcome.

It means trusting God to provide for our needs. We don't always have to come out on top, as long as we come out on the right side, as long as we come out on the side of faith in God. Putting your faith in God – it's the easiest hard thing you'll ever do. It's easy because the choice is simple, and it's hard because we don't control the outcome.

We don't see how God can help the situation so we fail to trust the outcome to God – we don't trust that when we are most vulnerable, God will take care of us. So we do it our way – the way we've always done things – and we get what we've always gotten: more struggle, more frustration and unhappiness, less love and togetherness.

But there is a better way. Look at the Samaritan woman's interaction with Jesus. She doesn't pretend to have it all figured out. She isn't even sure what Jesus is offering her. But she accepts it anyway. When Jesus offers her "living water," she has no idea what he's talking about. She says to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?"

And Jesus says to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water (meaning the water from the well) will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." Well now I know what the Samaritan woman is talking about. That kind of does leave you wondering what Jesus means when he offers us living water, a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.

What is this living water that Jesus offers us? Admit it, you're wondering that right now, aren't you? Well, the truth is, you know exactly what this living water is when it comes to Jesus, living water is anything that contributes to our living a more faithful life, living life more as God intended. Living water is God's word put in our hearts to be acted on.

Whatever that is for you in this moment, I don't know. But you do! You know at least one thing that you could be doing, or one thing you could stop doing, that would make a real positive difference in your life – we all do. And the only thing that's keeping us from doing it is a lack of faith. We're not certain it will work, or that we can do it, or we're not certain what the outcome will be. Don't let that stop you!

The only certainty you need – the only certainty any of us needs – is that doing the next right thing-that God puts in our hearts will always be better than putting it off, or being afraid, or clinging to our old ways of doing things.

We don't have to have it all figured out! We just have to have faith. When Jesus offers the Samaritan woman "living water" – whatever that is, for her at that moment – she says to Him, "Sir" – she still doesn't know who Jesus is – but she says to him anyway, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have

to keep coming here to draw water.” Jesus is offering her exactly what she needs at that moment, and he has placed it in her heart to know what that is, and he is trusting her to make the right choice – to accept that which God is offering her, to accept ***Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.***

Accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior on faith alone, despite how dangerous it is to be vulnerable in this world, despite how much we want to be out ahead of others, accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior means trusting the outcome to God. It means doing what God puts in your heart to do, regardless of any uncertainty. And the funny thing about it is, in the end, doing the right thing in the eyes of God is so much easier in the long run.

The bookmark you received in your pew Bible today offers an assurance of God’s love for us - for you. “For God so loved the world that he sent his only son Jesus so that everyone who believes in him may” ... You fill in the blank. Maybe it’s what you have on your bookmark, a miracle performed by Jesus. Or maybe it’s something known only to you in your heart of hearts – what it is that Jesus wants to do for you, right this moment, or sometime this week, or out there ahead of you in the future, just around the next corner.

Take that bookmark with you today and let it be a reminder to be watching for what Jesus would like to do for you – what Jesus would like you to accept and embrace about him as your Lord, your Savior. God is sending Jesus to you this very day to meet your need. And all you need to do is ask and you shall receive. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Merciful God, often we have prayed that you would help us to avoid wandering minds during worship and prayer. But now, O Lord, let our minds wander!

Let our thoughts grasp the vastness and the beauty of the universe and the awesome power and love of its Creator.

Let us dream of a time foretold by your angels and your prophets, when there shall be peace and plenty in a community of love.

With your power and your promise and your love to encourage and sustain us, let us reach out as with the hands and heart of Jesus Christ, that your kingdom may come, in this place and across the whole earth.

And help us to do our best every day, Lord, and forgive us when we slip. Teach us to be kind to other people and to help them at all times.

Bless all parents and teachers and leaders and all the members of our community.

Bless us, Lord, and in your love for us, help us to be better and inspire us do our best for you.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.