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St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
Proper 24, October 25, 2020
Psalm 1: 1, 3

The truly happy person . . .
love(s) the Lord's Instruction,
and recite(s) God's Instruction day and night!
They are like a tree replanted by streams of water,
which bears fruit at just the right time
and whose leaves don't fade.

Amen.

All we have to do this time of year is look outside our window or take a simple trip to the grocery store, and --if we pause to look--we will be overwhelmed with the beauty of fall. Part of what makes fall so beautiful is that monochromatic greens are replaced with the splatter paint colors of golden yellows, crimson reds, browns, and firey oranges. At this time of year, it's easier for us to understand why the scriptures so often compare humans and human life to trees.¹ Trees are a sign not only of the passing of the seasons, but a symbol of prosperity, health and well-being. Today's Psalm, Psalm 1, uses this human-tree comparison.² The truly happy person, the psalmist tells us, loves the Lord's instruction. These people are like trees that are replanted by streams of

¹ Tull, Patricia. "Commentary on Psalm 1." *Working Preacher*, October 26, 2014.
https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4602

² All biblical translations from the CEB.

water. Because they are grounded in the right place, “they bear fruit at just the right time and their leaves flourish.”

If the truly happy person “loves the Lord’s instruction and repeats it day and night,” we better look into the word *instruction* so we know what it is we should love! Our English “instruction” comes from the Hebrew word *torah*. *Torah* is most properly translated as instruction or teaching, but scholars for centuries have more often translated it as “law.” So when in today’s Gospel the Pharisees ask, “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the **Law**?” we can hear them asking, “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the **instruction**?” and find a clear connection between the Psalm and Gospel. Jesus provides the answer to the question, “what does the truly happy person love and repeat day and night?”

Jesus’ answer is not one dimensional. Instead, like the splatter painted, multi-colored leaves that surround us in fall, his answer is multi-dimensional. The first facet, he says, is to love God with all your heart, with all of your being, and with all of your mind. The second dimension--which is like the first-- is to love your neighbor as yourself. “The quick succession and the manner in which Jesus states the two commandments highlights a complementary and symbiotic relationship between the two,” Professor Raj Nadella, New Testament scholar at Columbia Theological Seminary, points out in his Gospel commentary. Nadella goes on to say, “the second builds upon the foundation of the first but the first manifests itself through the second. While the second is built upon the first, the first is not complete without the second. Loving our neighbors is, to a great extent, an act of loving God in whose image the

neighbors are made.”³ Just as in the fall leaves there is no clear spot on a leaf where red ends and orange begins, so too with Jesus’ answer: loving God bleeds into loving neighbors. Loving neighbors cannot happen without grounding ourselves in loving God with all of our heart, being, and mind. They cannot be separated. One does not exist without the other.

I wonder . . . in your life do you have a multi-dimensional interplay between loving God *with all that you are* and love of neighbor?

The psalmist writes that this truly happy person--one who loves this interplay between love of God and neighbor--is like a tree that is “**replanted**.” Other translations say the truly happy person is **planted**. Only the Common English Bible uses the word **replanted**. I reached out to Eden professor Clint McCann, who is the translator of the psalms in the Common English Bible, and asked him why he chose the word **replanted**. He replied that an authoritative Hebrew lexicon gives the meaning of this Hebrew root as “transplant” so “replant” is a closer translation. The psalmist wants to connect a truly happy person who loves the Lord’s instruction to a tree that is transplanted or replanted. This is significant. We are not planted once and for all. And doesn’t this square with our life experience? How many of us as individuals, as families, as communities has been planted and thrived in only one space--one place-- all of our lives? True happiness, love of the Lord’s instruction, means that sometimes we need replanting.

Many people see that the mainline Christian Church in America is in the midst of being replanted. The Rev. Susan Beaumont writes in *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You Are Going*, “the basic models and processes that define the church

³ Nadella, Raj. “Commentary on Matthew 22:34-46.” *Working Preacher*, October 25, 2020. workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4650

are [now] being deconstructed . . . some new ways are emerging, but we do not yet know what the new world order will be, and what forms of institutional church will remain, if any.”⁴ The church is in the process of being replanted so that it may bear not splatter painted leaves in golden yellows, crimson reds, browns, and fiery oranges that will soon flutter to the ground and wither. No. The church is being replanted so that it may have leaves that never fade and fruit that is born at just the right time.

St. Barnabus, like the larger church, is in a replanting stage. It was planted in the 1950s, in post-World War II America, to serve the burgeoning population moving to newly built subdivisions in the area. As the Washington University report *Segregation in St. Louis: Dismantling the Divide* points out, these subdivisions were built using Federal Housing Authority loans.⁵ One of the loan requirements was that subdivisions be for white families only. That was then. Now, nearly 70 years later, one of St. Barnabus’ closest neighbors, McClure North High School, has a student population that is 70% African American. St. Barnabus’ neighbors have changed. The mainline church has changed therefore living out the Lord’s instruction to love God with all you are and to love your neighbors is changing, too. After all, as the Psalmist reminds us, sometimes to have leaves that never fade and to bear fruit, we need replanting by fresh streams of water.

I wonder . . . what does “replanting” look like for St. Barnabus?

Replanting can feel daunting. Rev. Beaumont acknowledges that “it is exhausting trying to keep the old structures intact, managing the anxiety of the transition, and

⁴ Beaumont, Susan. *How to Lead When You Don’t Know Where You Are Going*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 8.

⁵ Cambria, Nancy. *Segregation in St. Louis: Dismantling the Divide*. (St. Louis: Washington University, 2018).

making space for the birth of the new thing--all at the same time.”⁶ But today’s psalm assures us that there are streams--plural, streamS-- of life giving water out there to nourish our replanting. And the psalm ends in verse six by telling us that we are not alone. “The Lord is intimately acquainted with the way of the righteous” (v. 6) -- intimately acquainted with that truly happy person who loves the Lord’s instruction to love our neighbors as an act of loving God in whose image our neighbors are made. We are nourished and we are not alone.

Amen.

⁶ Beaumont, 9.