

Letting God Lead
October 6, 2013
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No matter what we do, no matter how we spend our days at work, or at home,

We always question ourselves, don't we?

Am I doing enough? Am I even doing the right things?

How can I make things better?

How are other people helping me help them?

Is there something more? And if there is, should I be reaching for it?

Or is it safe, yet, to feel content? Is it safe yet, to feel safe?

Whether all of these thoughts come from our relationships, or our jobs,

or our thoughts about the stability of our home and family... they're there, right?

And it's not necessarily a bad thing, but a human thing.

I think we ask ourselves these questions as just a sort of natural part of moving along.

Still breathing, still living, still walking toward a place we can't yet see, ahead.

...It's the way we figure stuff out...solve problems...

... so no, it's not bad. Though we can definitely get too carried away with it, huh?

Sometimes these analytical brains of ours go into hyper-active mode.

Ludicrous speed!

And we start assuming too much, and over-thinking too many things,

And we get *frustrated*, too, right?

After asking all of the right questions, and doing so much,

we get *frustrated* when things aren't just perfectly the way we hoped them to be...

...As if we can somehow be in control of all things,

when we know in our hearts this just isn't true...

...when we know in the deep stuff underneath all of these thoughts that float around in our minds,

That it's only *Life*, at the end of the day, that has the ultimate say.

---That Something much larger than ourselves,

ultimately moves the world and each of us in it, to be as it is.

And in those times of frustration, we sometimes find ourselves asking,

"What's the point in doing anything at all?"

So where's the balance?

It's no good to ignore these questions....

...But it also does us no good to be overwhelmed

by them to the point of being fearful, does it?

Because both ends of those things keep the gifts

each of us bring to the world locked up inside of us, don't they?

...Where's the balance? ...How do we save ourselves from always being just so frustrated?

...'how can we be productive in moving toward our goals,

and still live at peace?'

It's a pretty good question, isn't it? ...A whopper.

And none of us have the full answer to give, otherwise life would be just swell, all around!

It's a tough one, but it's one we're asked to ask ourselves today, regardless.

...This is our meditation with God, this morning,
and the thoughts we're asked to share with each other, today,
as a church of God's people.

...We don't seek the answer just on our own, in our daily lives outside of this place,
But here, together, too, as the body of Christ.

We're still in the middle of stewardship season...

We talked about what that means a little bit
before I left for my ordination requirement the weekend before last.
And I know Charles and Mike touched on some of these things, too,
last Sunday, leading us in worship.

(Thanks so much again to those guys for standing up and helping out.)

This is the time for us, here at Deer Park, to be asking these questions,
for sake of *moving along*...

Each of us, together, as a whole church, we're asked to wonder:

Are we doing enough? Are we even doing the right things?

How can we make things better?

How are other people letting us help them?

Is there something *more* ahead of us we haven't yet touched?

And if there is, should we be reaching for it?

And we, as a church, as a body united together in God,

We sometimes get frustrated, too, right?

'Ugh. We've already done so much! Why aren't things just perfect?'

But no worries... in the middle of all of these questions and even the frustrations,

our scripture readings from the lectionary for today,

remind us that we're definitely not alone.

From Psalm 137... what do we hear?

(Psalm 137) By the rivers of Babylon-- there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. 2 On the willows there we hung up our harps. 3 For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" 4 How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! 6 Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

We see faithfulness to Jerusalem, but also FRUSTRATION, right?

We were also asked to read from Lamentations, chapter 1...

And those verses express the same.

God's people facing exile to Babylon,

and all of the frustration that came to them as a result of trying so hard---

---asking those tough questions and responding the best they could,

giving all they could to God---

--and still facing hardship, even though many had been faithful in the work they'd done.

In our reading from 2 Timothy...

Paul's spent the latter part of his life asking himself the question of what he had inside of himself to give back to God...

And he did. He gave it. All of it.

...But things definitely haven't turned out too easy, or perfect in his life and ministry, either, has it?

Where's Paul writing from?

...Yes---prison!

And we're not talking a modern day penitentiary either.

Those places didn't come equipped with clean sheets and cable TV.

They were dark. Dank. Pest-ridden. Inhumane.

---Paul, who's indisputably given *everything* of himself to God, and God's purpose in the world...locked up.

...Sitting stuck behind walls in some damp corner, in chains.

...Lots of room for frustration there, right?

But how does Paul respond?

From verse 5 of our chapter in 2 Timothy, he says:

5 I am reminded of your sincere *faith*, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. 6 For this reason I remind you to *rekindle the gift of God that is within you* through the laying on of my hands; 7 for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. 8 Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, 9 who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. ... 11 For [the] gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, 12 and for this reason I suffer as I do. *But I am not ashamed*, for I know the one in whom I have *put my trust*, and I am *sure* that he is able to guard, until that day, what I have entrusted to him. 13 Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the *faith* and *love* that are in Christ Jesus. 14 Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, *with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us*.

Paul here, a faithful servant in Christ, giving all he's got,
is surrounded by things not being just perfect, to say the least,
But he's also somehow not surrounded in a cloud of anger or frustration, is he?
Instead, what does he talk about?

He talks about faith.

And in this faith, about rekindling again and again the gift of God that is within you.

He asks us to guard the good treasure entrusted to us,
with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

...And that's where we find that balance, isn't it?

From that question we're meditating on today, of
'how can we, as a church, move toward our goals, and still live at peace?'

That's where we find an answer, right?

In that space of rest, between *faithfulness* and *faith*.

As we ask what gifts we have to give back to God, back to God's people as the church,

To avoid those frustrations that come

when we find the world and this place still isn't perfect,

It's important to remember the difference between those two things,

and to hold onto both.

Faithfulness and faith hold two different meanings.

Faithfulness is our willingness to ask the tough questions

about what we have to offer the life around us through God's church,

And to give and give and give of ourselves again and again,

not for the sake of reward, but for the sake of God, and spreading God's love alone.

Faithfulness is our responding to God's call, no matter what stands in our way.

No matter the obstacles which surround us, out of love and devotion,
and for no other reason.

Not out of expectation for things to be perfect, or need for material gain of any kind.

And *faith* is the act of remembering, that through all of this, in all we do,
we are never doing it alone.

Faith is remembering that the company we keep is nothing other than the holy presence
of God.

And that God will see us through all things, and walks with us, step, by step, by step,

Leading us to wherever we will go,

even when we can't see that far ahead to know, ourselves, where we'll wind up.

In our faithfulness to do the best we can with all we've got---

--with everything God's placed in our life to better spread God's love---

---our *faith* in the One who put it there, is what saves us from our frustrations,
and brings us to a place of peace,

Regardless of the angst and troubles which surround us always in this unpredictable life.

Paul asks us to remember God hears us and holds us through each minute we're here.

To remember that Something much larger than ourselves,

ultimately moves the world and each of us in it, to be as it is. And to be glad for it.

In Paul's words, 'To *know* the one in whom we have *put our trust*, and be *sure* that he is
able to guard what we have entrusted to him.

Which is the very heart of who we are. The stuff of our souls.

...All that we give.

And not *if*, but *when* we find ourselves asking the question,

“What’s the point in doing any of this at all?”

To let the truth silently remind us, from way deep down,

that we do what we do, we give what we give,

For the sake of giving God’s love.

...For the sake of helping people know the One that is already inside of them,

who guides them and loves them through all things.

And we do it and we give it for the sake of nothing else.

Not for perfection. Not for ease.

Not for status, or for feeling we’ve achieved all we ever dreamed for ourselves---

--separately, or together as the church...

...But for the hope of sharing in the spirit of God, and loving as we’ve been loved.

In our faithfulness, we wait in faith, letting God lead us, and watching for what beautiful things

God will do with what God’s placed inside of us.

And what breathtaking things the sight of those things bring.

From our lectionary reading in Luke CH 17,

with faith the size of a mustard seed we will see those mountains in front of us move.

Trees uprooted--one minute growing here, the next thriving there...

We’ll see what seems impossible made real,

startled from all expectations of what we once thought we knew,
And awakened into a new moment,
when all things are made possible through the power and strength of God.

As we close up today, I wanted to very quickly share with you something that happened,
last weekend, while I was away.

See recently, I've been asking all of these questions of myself,
that we the church ask ourselves now.

The event I went to last weekend was a requirement for ordination,
and I was kind of dreading it. Didn't know what to expect.

For a few weeks leading up to that moment

I pulled up to the Mother Cabrini shrine in the fog,

In these questions, I was asking, I also asked for God to guide me.

To bless me with some answers---and to talk LOUD,

Because I knew I'd have a hard time hearing, with my mind so cluttered.

I told you about at least one of those moments, recently,

But a lot happened since then, and God kept talking louder, and louder, and louder,

Until there was no chance I might even possibly confuse what God had said,
and the direction God's voice was leading me...

... It all culminated in this retreat. For the sake of time today, I won't go into detail,

But God, in that weekend, reminded me to have faith. To trust.

And to remember that I am never alone.

You are not alone. You are not alone. You are not alone.

In three different ways, God reminded me of this.

As a *pastor*, God said to me, “you are not alone.”

Through that unexpected weekend coming just after I’d asked God to speak to me,

I was surrounded by the people I seldom see, so often forget.

Pastors, like myself, all of them experiencing similar thoughts and asking the same questions.

In our situation as a *church*, God said to me, “you are not alone.”

With nearly every pastor I spoke with, they shared with me

that his or her church was experiencing the exact same things we are.

(*Before* I said a word about any of the anxiousness in my own heart)

Across the board... there’s been hardship. Dropping attendance. Financial strain.

...Many of those churches both sadly and thankfully
experiencing struggle past *anything* we’ve faced, here.

And as a *person*, just myself, God told me, “You are not alone.

I am with You... *all* of the time.”

While I was driving down that mountain, from that shrine,

I said “thank you. Thank you. Thank you,” to God,

For talking to me even louder than I’d asked.

For guiding me, and leading me, past all of the clutter. All of the questions.

And I kid you not... you weren’t there,

so you’ll just have to trust and believe what I’m telling you is the pure truth, unaltered.

Not even a minute after saying those words, “Thank you,” four times,

This song started playing in the car, past the radio I’d already turned on.

I turned the volume down in the stereo, and dug through my bag.

The song was coming from my iphone. It must've been jostled on the way down.

It was a song I'd never played from a playlist on that phone before.

One of deep significance to me, regarding my hopes for my own life and future.

I couldn't turn it off. Couldn't find the right icon to push. None of them were the source.

So I pulled off on the side of the road so I wouldn't drive over a cliff,

and finally hit the Pandora icon, wondering if maybe it was coming from there.

It wasn't, because an entirely different song came on, after I touched the symbol.

And the lyrics... the words that came through the little speaker were these:

The first verse:

Am I faithful, am I strong, am I good enough to belong---In your reverie a perfect girl?
...All your expectations bury me.

The second verse:

Don't worry you will find the answer if you let it go. Give yourself some time to falter, but
don't forgo knowing that you're loved no matter what and everything will come around in
time. .. Know that I am here for you.

The song went on and on, all of it speaking just as loudly, to very specific things I'd said
silently to God, alone.

Don't worry you will find the answer if you let it go. And I sat there on the side of that
road, coming down from that shrine, and I cried.

Hearing God's voice, answer all of my questions,

through these past weeks, through that weekend, and there, in that moment, I cried.

God holds us, God guides us. It's up to us to let go, and let God lead.

Asking what we can do for God, and giving all we've got *back*,

for no other reason than expressing the love we feel for God inside,

and feeling the joy and peace of God's love for us filling our hearts again and again,
through all moments---the easy stuff and the hard stuff, all the same.

Stewardship season isn't only about asking the tough questions,

about what exactly it is we have to give back to the world,

But the inexpressible joy, and peace, and rest

that overwhelm us, when we hear the answer.

And the relief we find in our souls, in feeling God's embrace around our lives,

and letting God lead us wherever we'll go,

to use us however God chooses. ---However God made us to be used

to spread that same love of God we feel in our hearts, to the hearts of others.

So, in this stewardship season, ask the tough questions,

and listen to God speak loudly in your own life.

Don't let yourself fall into frustration, but let yourself let go, and love every minute of it.

In your faithfulness, watching with *faith* as God takes us to places we never thought we'd go,

to do things with our lives that reveal the strength and glory of God

in the most unbelievable and unexpected ways,

as we---as the church---spread and share God's Kingdom together

with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

Amen.

