

## Sermon – A Fully Alive Human Being

Jeremiah 15:10-21, John 1: 1-5, July 2, 2023

In November of my senior year in high school, President Kennedy was assassinated. Lyndon Johnson was sworn-in and was President when we seniors received our graduation announcements to mail to family and friends. And can you imagine anything worse than hand-addressing graduation cards when you're 17 or 18 and a few weeks from graduation? Boring! One day, then, in English class, Mrs. Dennis asked how many announcements we sent. I can't recall how many I sent. All I remember is that I was the only senior who sent a graduation card to President Lyndon Johnson. Such an invitation may not be so unusual nowadays, but it was unprecedented at my high school at the time to send the President a graduation announcement. The teacher, Mrs. Dennis, thought it was a hoot. But some of the kids thought it was a waste of a stamp. He would never respond. Why do such a thing? Well, Dewey Johnson. Maybe he'll think I'm a distant relative.

A couple of weeks later I circulated amongst the students a card that I had received. It was beautiful – white card stock, red and blue ink, with gold embossing. It began, “The President joins me in extending our congratulations...” He didn't respond, but Lady Bird did. And my classmates felt a bit low at that point, each felt like there might have been a valid reason he/she had not been voted Most Likely to Succeed. But me? I felt really alive. Maybe you've felt that way

also at times. And maybe we will all of us have such feelings yet. A bit of “aliveness” in the midst of our Presbyterian “decently and in order.”

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William Sloane Coffin used to say that God’s glory is a fully alive human being. And what does that even mean? Kierkegaard once told a story about a wild duck who was used to the freedom of the trackless wilderness of the sky. Yet, on one of his fall migrations he chanced to alight in a farmyard where the tame ducks were being fed. He ate some of their corn and liked it so much that he lingered until the next meal, and then the next week, indeed, until the next autumn when his old companions again flew over. They gave cry that it was time to fly away, and the old ecstasy of freedom stirred within him. He flapped his wings to join them, but he could not leave the ground. He had grown fat on the farmer’s corn and the lazy lifestyle of the barnyard. And although each autumn until his death the call of the wild ducks roused him, they seemed fainter and further away.

The fully alive wild duck had become what we allow ourselves to become at times, persons who let ourselves get grounded by our circumstances and accept humdrum, boredom, and worse as the way things are. But God will help us just as God helped Jeremiah. Jeremiah does not like being a prophet, a wild man. He wants the tame life. Jeremiah loves his people and hates pronouncing God’s judgment upon them for their sins. Still, he can’t help himself. “If I say, ‘I will not

... speak any more in God's name,' then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones. I cannot contain God's word." He can't keep his mouth shut.

The old African proverb that goes, "the one who would carry light must endure burning," certainly applies to Jeremiah. He gets roughed up and abused by his people daily for intervening in their lives with God's word. And he complains to God, jeremiads we call them. "Woe is me, my mother, that you ever bore me, a man of strife and contention.... Truly, God you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that dry up." But God keeps giving the prophetic word to Jeremiah and reassuring him that he's on the right path. "I have intervened in your life for good (not bad)... And I am making of you a fortified wall of bronze that your own people cannot overcome... If you utter what is precious and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth. And you will prevail for I am with you." And Jeremiah did prevail for some forty years and did see the prophecies given him come true." Judah did fall to Babylon, but then, as Jeremiah also prophesied later, the people did return to Jerusalem and the nation was restored.

Just as God is glorified when wild ducks live the life of a wild duck, God is glorified when we both enjoy the life God gives us and are useful to God's purposes, not when we allow ourselves to get stuck and take our ease and not move on with our lives. God is for us and not against us. If God intervenes in our lives as

God did with Jeremiah, it's for our good not bad. And yes, the life God gives is not always easy. Illness and certain circumstances can certainly be hindrances to fullness of life. Still, maybe we can enjoy life more and be more useful to God than we think.

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Are any of you retired? You're a rather young-looking bunch, but then again, people constantly tell me I need to have my eyes checked. But should any of you be retired, you know that retirement is a time to enjoy God's creation, enjoy what God has done in our lives, enjoy God more so than being useful. We talk all our younger productive lives about smelling "the roses." Well, if not in retirement, when? And in retirement you can take your own sweet time, not meaning that you have nothing to do, but rather you have nothing you have to do. Not on a schedule. Still, even in retirement, one doesn't want to give up on being useful. And notice I am using the word useful rather than productive.

In this room there are those of us who when we were younger put in long days, took care of families, worked hard on the job, volunteered, got lots accomplished. We were productive. But as senior citizens, what happens? I don't know about your productivity, but some days the harder I work the behinder I get. I am, though, a better problem solver than I used to be. For ex., when I was in my early twenties, I'd stay up late at night with friends trying to answer the question, "Why am I

here?” Of course, we never came up with a truly satisfactory answer. But nowadays, when I simply walk from one room of the house into another, I often stop and say to myself, “Why am I here?” And most of the time I can figure it out. In any event, I constantly keep in mind what Wendell Berry once wrote.

Wendell Berry raises the question, “What is or what should be the goal of our life and work?” He then goes on to answer, “Probably (this question) should not be answered for anybody in particular by anybody else in particular. But the ancient norm or ideal seems to have been a life in which you perceived your calling, faithfully followed it, and did your work with satisfaction; married, made a home, and raised a family; associated generously with your neighbors; ate and drank with pleasure the produce of your local landscape; grew old seeing yourself replaced by your children or younger neighbors but continuing in old age to be useful, and finally died a good or holy death surrounded by loved ones.”

Note that he says, “grew old seeing yourself replaced by your children or younger neighbors but continuing in old age to be useful.” Being useful to God doesn’t require eight hours a day with one’s nose to the grindstone. Being useful to God doesn’t require being on a schedule and can differ one person to another depending on one’s talents, experiences, health, energy level, interests, and the needs of those in one’s ambit. But sometimes as we seek to be useful, the most we can do is intervene in a person’s life with prayer, intervene for their good.

Now, I agree with those who say that if you pray for another person, you are obligated to act for that person's wellbeing should God then call upon you to do so. Prayer is not cheap. E.g., if we pray for God to heal or guide or sustain a person, we vow our help in that process should it be needed. But what if there is no action we can take to help the situation, no donation of money that will make a positive difference, no opportunity to say an encouraging word? Why should we attempt to intervene for the good of another by going to God in prayer?

The great spiritual guide, Douglas Steere, a Quaker beloved by Presbyterians, says the following. We Christians believe that all human beings are connected in and through God. We can state this connection in a variety of ways, but one way is to remember that God is our power source, Jesus THE light of the world, fully plugged into God, just as we his followers are also the light of the world, plugged in to some degree, says Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. It is the inner strength that God provides, that enables us to shine or be fully alive. But God also gives us freedom of choice. We have the freedom to plug in and be fully alive or unplug and but flicker. But even if unplugged, the light or power of a person's life can be turned back on immediately, for whether or not one chooses to love God, God loves him/her. Whether or not one chooses to plug in to God, God awaits the call to restore service. Therein, what we need to keep straight.

Too often when I hear people talking about praying for others, it's in part like God intervened in the life of Jeremiah. Certainly we pray for the person's good. Still, the implication seems to be, "It's entirely up to me, or it's up to us to help this person. Indeed, the more people we have praying for ole Dewey, hopefully the better we can talk God into helping him." No. Ganging up on God is not nice and is absolutely unnecessary.

God was concerned about this person before we ever were. What we do when we pray for another person is add our concern to the love that God already has in force for this individual. We don't have to talk God into intervening in a person's life for the good. God's already at work. Our prayers don't have to turn the tide as though it's up to us alone. We aren't the person's source of inner strength, God is. Our prayers are simply added to God's love, and seemingly they have to only do what? Tip the balance of God's love in favor of the one prayed for. I don't know how to describe such power in cosmic detail. God is simply the source of a person's inner strength. It is useful to God's purpose for us to pray for those whose light is flickering. And by adding our prayer, we can help tip the balance of God's love for the good of the one prayed for. God invites our prayers.

Douglas Steere says, "When we hold up the life of another person before God, when we expose this life to God's love, when we pray for its release from self-destructiveness, for the arousing of its inner health, for the restoration of its healthy

relationships with others, for its strength to resist a temptation, for its courage to continue against sharp opposition...” at that point we share in God’s love for this individual, we’re working alongside God.

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The good news this morning is that we’re useful even when all we can do for another is pray. Our hope is that the person prayed for be enabled to take off and soar as would a wild duck, that he/she can again enjoy the experience of being fully alive. Amen.