

## **“Reflecting Generosity”**

**Genesis 2:18-24**

**1 Timothy 6:17-19**

The word *courage* and *courageous* appear only a few times in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, we find some variation of “Be strong, and be of good courage” twelve times. This suggests to me that life is not easy or carefree. The best food is made from scratch and not cooked in a microwave. Come in one Monday morning and check out how our nut rolls are made. You will be struck by how labor intensive the process of preparing good food really is. The same is true of the spirit, of living well; there is no labor-saving machinery.

In Psalm 34:10, the psalmist writes of waiting. Waiting – being patient – is hard for us, with stores open 24/7 and with a twenty-four-hour television news cycle. We have a barn beam in our house from a barn that was built in the 1850’s from Medina County trees that were growing in the 1700’s. I appreciate the patience of a 300 year old tree that is now gracing our living room.

In one of his children’s books, nineteenth century Scottish pastor and writer George MacDonald writes: “What is meant by growing? . . . It is far from meaning that you get bigger and stronger. It means that you become able both to understand and to wonder at more of the things about you. There are people who the more they understand, wonder the less; but such are not growing straight; they are growing crooked”. “Growing straight” is another way to say “taking hold of the life that really is life.”

Christian faith is rooted in a central biblical theme: life, both physical life and life as relationship with God, is good.

The first chapter of our Bible tells of God's creation of the world, including humankind, male and female, made "in the image of God" (Genesis 1:27). A second account of creation, in the next chapter, tells us that "God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Genesis 3:7).

Those of you who have been joining us on Monday evenings or Wednesday mornings for our study of Genesis know that the writer of our Bible study, Margaret Feinberg, tells us that. . . "if the first chapter of Genesis provides a bird's eye view of the story of creation, then the second chapter provides a street-level view as it continues the story of creation adding rich details to the creation of the garden and humankind. An interesting shift in perspective takes place from Genesis 1 to Genesis 2. The first chapter of Genesis tells the creation story from God's perspective; the second chapter of Genesis tells the story from a human perspective".

If we take a look at the 3 verses immediately preceding our Old Testament text for this Sunday, we may experience an expansion of our understanding of God and the purpose of humankind.

Genesis 2:15-17 . . . <sup>15</sup>The Lord GOD took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. <sup>16</sup>And the Lord GOD commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; <sup>17</sup>but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."

Many people have falsely visualized a Garden of Eden in which Adam just walked around eating the fruit of the trees at his leisure and never had to work!

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Have you ever tried to walk through a garden that hasn't been touched or worked in for 2 or 3 years? Will Knoblock and I experienced it this past August when we arrived at a parishioners house on a Saturday morning when due to health issues, the backyard garden had not been touched in 3 years. We couldn't get to the backyard because the walkway between the side of the house and the high wooden fence was overgrown with vines. Will fired up my bush trimmer and I fired up my weed whacker and we cut our way through to the backyard. Our goal was simple. To cut out walkways through the yard and then trim back from the walkways. What had been a beautiful, well kept Garden of Eden had quickly turned into a yard of overgrown vines and weeds completely hiding outdoor furniture, clay pots, and I even uncovered a grill.

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How does that expand our understanding of God and the purpose of humankind? Why did God create us in his image and put us here in this beautiful garden called "earth"? Why did God cause a deep sleep to fall upon the man, take one of his ribs, and create a woman? Why does a man leave his father and mother and cling to his wife? How could the man and woman be naked and not ashamed?

How each of us answers these questions determines whether or not our relationship with God and our relationship with one another are growing and becoming stronger and more beautiful OR are your relationships status quo or becoming weaker and overgrown with vines and weeds? Are we "taking hold of life that really is life"?

The last chapter of our Bible describes “the river of the water of life . . . flowing from the throne of God” (Revelations 22:1). In the Gospels --- the heart of the Bible for Christians and that part of the Bible for which many Christians stand when it is read in worship – we hear Jesus say, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

Where do we find this abundant life? The 1 Timothy text that is the theme of our October stewardship emphasis, is from a letter to the second-generation Christian church. William Barclay calls this passage “Advice to the Rich”. Whatever social level we in the United States consider ourselves to belong to, we are wealthy in the eyes of most of the world. According to Barclay, the passage tells us “not that wealth is a sin, but that wealth is a very great responsibility”. The words of Timothy – generous and share – stress that we live in community, with others. Sometimes our understanding of Christian life centers on God and us as individuals, but that is not the vantage point of this epistle.

Sociologists tell us that people today desperately want and seek community, but their experience tells them it is hard to find – in the church or anywhere else. Scripture and tradition tell us that the life that really is life is a life in community, life conscious of relationship with others. God cannot be our Father, unless he is their Father; and if we do not see Him and feel Him as their Father, we cannot know him as ours. The world around us usually tells each of us that we should live as if we are the center of the universe. While we sometimes may feel as if hell is other people, our tradition tells us that we meet God through our relationships with others.

I am increasingly convinced that the task of church leaders is to help nurture a truly welcoming community, one that is able to maintain and nurture a richness of life that is both difficult – because of differences in matters like race, age, sexual orientation, and social standing – and vital, for the same reasons. To be that kind of church is to live life that really is courageous. When we live this life, we are guided by our hopes more than our fears. When we live this life, we love and pray for our enemies, whether personal, professional, or political – accepting what is perhaps the most difficult invitation of Jesus – Matthew 5:43-48 . . . <sup>43</sup>"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup>But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup>so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup>For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup>And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup>Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. When we live this life, we are courageous enough to admit that much of the time we fail to be our best selves and our best community. Yet when we live this life, as often as we can, we try to reflect God's generosity.

So what is Christian stewardship? It is simply our courageous attempt, having experienced the generosity and hospitality of the God we know in Jesus, to live a life that reflects that generosity, the life that really is life.

Be strong, and let your heart take courage, . . . so that you may take hold of the life that really is life.

May the peace of God . . . #679 – For the Fruit of All Creation