March 24th , 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Third Sunday In Lent

Hunger Pangs

1. Delegate

On Lorna’s last trip to Scotland, she brought me back a few things. One of those things, was this, a booklet called “It’s All in The Balance.” Before I even opened it up – I thought this was going to be some booklet on aligning my chakras or an ironic take on my inability to keep my balance physically. When I opened it up, to my surprise, it was a bunch of sticky pads, one side saying life, one side saying work, and in the middle of the binding, it says ‘balance.’ It has all sorts of fun sticky notes, from “don’t forget, reminder, urgent, fun, deadline,” – the regular stickers you’d see. But then there was that dreaded sticker – that sticker that is all about balance and the one I’m not particularly good at – the sticker that says “Delegate.”

I joked with Lorna – could I delegate all the things I didn’t like to do, like clean out my car, or do the dishes, or the grocery shopping. She said no: she is a wise woman indeed. She said I had to use the sticker on the parts of life that are the hardest – of saying someone else can do ‘that job’ or ‘that responsibility’ when I really wanted to do it. Because I’m proud, I don’t think arrogant – but proud. I have the Protestant work ethic mentality etched into my brain that says, ‘keep calm and carry on’ and don’t let them see you sweat.

1. The competitive marketplace

Behind the pulpit and day-to-day work, I’ll be honest

with you – in my world, Presbyterian ministers are some of the most competitive folks in a workplace. According to the Pew Research Centre in 2016, Presbyterians are the fifth most educated religious group in the Nation, more scholarly focused than the reported general public. Behind the glow of the Presbytery walls, the striving for more is real: who will be in the Baltimore Sun, who will get the book deal, who will preach that incredible sermon that will be passed around, who will get in a scholarly journal, and who will pursue a doctorate or a post-doc? I wish I was kidding and I could tell you that we weren’t that nerdy, but we are – and the striving for more means less delegating, more caffeine, and a ruthless attempt to ‘prove yourself worthy’ to colleagues.

I would not be so naïve to say that it only happens in my arena of work – that striving and getting ahead happens everywhere. Mostly because it’s simply human nature – it’s human nature to work, and struggle, and compromise, and seek approval. We are never free of want – the to-do list or the wish list does not cease. The guy with the big cheesy smile at work who looks like everything is easy and simply gets all the work done – he might be the same guy who falls straight into bed when he gets home – frayed and scattered with nothing left to give. The woman in a male-based career who is flying up the ranks could also be the woman that is drinking several energy drinks to make work look easy.

It’s human nature, and it isn’t intrinsically bad. It isn’t bad to have a great work ethic or to strive for wonderful things. It’s just that we get caught up in it – and the green sticker that says ‘delegate’ gets thrown in the trash as you carry on.

1. A Need to Rely on God

As I was exploring our reading from Isaiah this morning, I was reading some commentary. I came upon this line and had to repeat it a few times for it to become clear, and it is this: “Our constant striving to satisfy ourselves and others is doomed to failure.”

Perhaps you hear that and think – that’s awful, that’s a negative way at looking at things, and any sentence with ‘doomed’ is probably not helpful. But actually, for me to read it, to hear it out-loud, was profoundly life-giving and a blessing.

Because we get it in our heads so often that we will strive and strive and get to the finish line and be done – but that’s never how it goes – there’s another finish line, and another one after that. It’s a doomed course – and it’s not the course any of us need to be on, it’s just what society has produced since the days even before Isaiah was written.

Isaiah asks the poignant questions – why all this striving, why are you hungry, why are you thirsty? God can and will provide – but yet you run, yet you don’t ask from God what God can easily and freely give you. What are you fearful of – are you fearful you’ll fail?

Isaiah asks us to listen, and to listen carefully: instead of relying on everything else, instead of delegating and striving and getting no where – STOP. Just, stop. Because you don’t have to – Isaiah tells us that God has made a covenant from the beginning of time that God will be in relationship with us – no matter what. Even if we feel we’ve done the unforgivable, or we’ve run from God, or we’ve looked for all the things in the world that do not satisfy – God still says: you are welcome here. As the choir and cellist will play, there is ‘mercy still.’ Hear the glorious and encouraging refrain: Is there mercy still? Is there mercy still? There is mercy still. There is mercy still. There is mercy still for me.

In a time of competitive workplaces and strong work ethics there is mercy still. There is a mercy in God’s love that continues to call us, in the words of Isaiah, back to fellowship with God. For all we will ever need and all we could ever want that would truly satisfy us can only be found in God. As much as I joked a few weeks ago about the temptation of a new sports car, I know what I need can only be found in God alone: unconditional love, a spirit of peace, and a sense of abundance that covers me. These are things that I need, we all need, and when we are in relationship with God, we are given life in beautiful and wonderful ways.

IV. A Toy and Its Giver

In the commentary I read, I also appreciated this statement, which simplifies matters, “We become too focused on the toy rather than the giver.” Not only is my fellowship with God about letting go and letting God provide, it is also remembering that the sense of love and peace and abundance is not one that I’ve crafted from my own workings. I keep needing to remember and to be pulled back into the reality that these are gifts, gifts from God – that I neither deserve or have earned, but have been freely given because God’s grace and mercy is bigger than my own perceptions.

I invite you today into Isaiah’s text – I invite you to do what none of us wants to do – to let go and delegate with me, even a little bit, and let God intervene. I invite you to be in fellowship with God, who provides every single need and satisfies his people with those things that sustain. And further, I invite you into the joy that comes in admiring the giver of these gifts – of singing a little louder, of listening to the words a little closer, and marveling at the acts of creation. I invite you to fellowship and to gratitude, for a God who will always satisfy and have mercy still, for all of God’s children, each and every day. Amen.