

stops you in your tracks. Hear this: it does not make you less than to be served. It does not make you less than to be served. It makes you a part of the flock, a part of this world that is broken but still striving to be better, striving to create heaven on earth, even if it is only in brief flashes.

You remember Peter’s illustration of “thumbs to the right?” In having both your thumbs facing to the right, you are able to support someone else and be supported yourself simultaneously. It’s one of my favorite teaching tools with youth about prayer. Youth will also talk about “pancaking” or “waffling”—their terms, not mine—when holding hands to pray. “Pancaking” being where you are just wrapping your fingers around another’s palm and “waffling” being where you interlock fingers. In “waffling” your strengths are represented by the tips of your fingers and your weaknesses represented by the valley between each finger and when you interlock with another person, their strengths fill in your weaknesses, while your strengths fill in their weaknesses.

When we were talking about “Active Faith” within our Confirmation class last year, we were addressing how faith is meant to be acted upon, stir something within you to do something, not just to be talked about. And it was questioned if we were wrong to feel good about serving or volunteering. A delicate question. I would say it is not Christian-like to indulge in service out of pride, out of an effort to put on a show or front, to get “extra gold stars,” or as a publicity stunt. That’s selfish and self-serving. Not the Christian way in the least. I believe we feel good after investing in some act of service because we are getting a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven as God intended it to be—Brothers and Sisters coming together to help one another out, to lean on one another, to lend a hand, to uplift each other in spirit, to ground each other in faith and humility, to share in love, peace and joy. So, in that sense, I would say it’s a positive to feel good after serving because it is reinforcing our call from God since the beginning of time.

I feel like we are in the midst of a break in history where we are creating a new definition for BC: “Before COVID.” And before COVID hit, this Sunday was initially planned for “Rooted in Service” because our Brother in Malawi, Africa, Reverend John Gondwe, was supposed to be here worshipping with us and bringing love from our sister churches and communities in Malawi. And, unfortunately, because of COVID, his travel plans have been put on an indefinite pause.

I have been reflecting on my personal time in Africa: two times in Malawi most recently through our church’s partnership, and twice before those trips to Kenya through different organizations. Thanks to our own Patty Worsham, a teacher at E.C. Glass, and a few others, I have had a slight obsession with Africa in general, and that feels very weird to say and like a very “white privileged person” thing to say. But I don’t know how else to quite get at it. Glass has a sister school in Nairobi, Kenya in one of the largest slums in the world. There is a student organization that works throughout the year to send uplifting cards and raise funds to donate to the operation of the school, which has become a staple in the community by, not only providing education to an underserved population, but serving meals for empty bellies and a safe place to reside if only for a few hours in the day. It was through that organization I made my first trek over. It has now been 10 years—which is hard to believe—since that first trip. I can remember reflecting in my journal one of the first nights I was there, slightly delusional from the time change and not having fully adjusted, and I wrote, “I feel like I’ve found a piece of me here already, a piece I didn’t know existed, that I didn’t know was missing.” And each trip since then has been the same, but, consequently, I also feel like I leave a piece of myself behind when I come back home. And I’m okay with that. Somehow, I feel more whole because of it.

Each of those trips has had some sort of service component, whether tied directly to a church- or faith-based cause. But the reality is, it has nothing to do with what I am able to donate, contribute, or deliver to those communities abroad. It has everything to do with how they welcome me with open arms, fill my spiritual cup to overflowing, and spread their joy like wildfire. There will never be enough words or the right words to describe it. I just know each experience, each place, each community, each person has fed into who I am today as a child of God called to serve AND be served as well.

Friends, each of us is a part of the community—a puzzle piece, if you will, fitting into the big picture, serving our individual role and purpose, connected to every other piece, creating the whole of God’s masterpiece. So reflect, open yourselves up, look for the moments you can serve, be open to the times that you can be served. Let all God’s people say... **Amen.**

Works Cited

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First Presbyterian Church- Lynchburg, VA
“Rooted in Service”

August 9, 2020

OT: Deuteronomy 10:12-22 & NT: 1 Peter 3:8-11

There was a kindergarten teacher that gave her class a “show and tell” assignment of bringing something to class represent their religion. The day came to showcase their treasures and the first child got in front of the class and said, “My name is Benjamin and I am Jewish and this is the Star of David.” The second child got in front of her class and said, “My name is Mary, I am Catholic and this is my rosary.” The third child got up in front of his class and said, “My name is Tommy and I am Baptist and this is a casserole.”

I think we Presbyterians can identify with the Tommy the Baptist too, and probably some other denominations. We like to jump in and help—consoling where we can, lending a hand when we can, serving however we can...

We have been in the dirt a while with this “Rooted” series. We began with “What and Why?” and why our surroundings matter, moving through cultivating those roots, being rooted by God’s spirit, being rooted in relationships and love, being rooted in joy and worship and grace and faith and peace... Now, today: Rooted in Service.

When tree roots have had enough time to grow deep enough, strong enough, they begin to allow the tree to extend upward and outward. From rooted to reaching, if you will. All of our previous topics have been building up to this point. I have some highlights from a few of the past sermons to prove it...

“For us, it can be tempting to put down very shallow roots in our lives. Why? Speculatively, because shallow roots are easier. They do not require as much work. They do not require us to put off what we want in order to gain what we need. They do not require us to choose obedience in difficult circumstances, only the easy ones. They do not require us to choose honesty even when we know it will hurt us. They do not require us to choose compassion over unkindness. They do not require us to choose humility over pride.... They do not require us to choose generosity over selfishness” (“Rooted: What and Why,” 10 May 2020, Rev. P.A. Thompson).

To be ROOTED, we must get in the game and get in the Word. We must do everything we can to stay in the game and grow in the Word. And when the going gets tough, we must do everything we can to persevere, surrounding ourselves with the right matter—Christ, Community, and Culture—to feed us, support us, and strengthen us” (“Rooted: Surrounding Matter”, 17 May 2020, Rev. P.A. Thompson).

When the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ is truly received it yields transformed lives. God becomes a force in us that cannot be stopped or moved.... Until God’s love is truly felt and embodied and expressed in every nook and cranny of our community and world, we need to continue sharing and giving God’s love. We all need to stop being content with hearing and knowing and actually love without ceasing” (“Rooted: Love Pt 1,” 14 June 2020, Rev. P.A. Thompson).

And because God is active in life through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, and not a bump on a log or a couch potato, love is active. Love is an expression from God to us and it is an expression from God through us to others, where we are the instruments of God’s love. Not only is it that we “ought” to love, but we are able to love, we have the power and strength to love, because God has first loved us” (“Rooted: Love Pt 1,” 14 June 2020, Rev. P.A. Thompson). See? All taken from Peter’s previous sermons and I could go on because we’ve had some awesome messages uniting for this powerful, foundational message to be Rooted in God in all things....

The Deuteronomy text was to go back to our roots of Israel. In Thomas Mann’s words, “Deuteronomy is a *retelling* of stories from Israel’s past. Especially in the first half of the book (chaps. 1-11), the authors repeat stories of particular importance for Israel’s identity, stories already recorded in the books of Exodus and Numbers. So Moses reminds his audience of the shameful failure to take the land of Canaan, which led to the period of wandering in the wilderness (Deut. 1:19-46), then jumps to the more recent journeys through East Jordan (chaps. 2-3), turns back to the events at Horeb (that is, Sinai, receiving the Ten Commandments; chaps. 4-5), and then to the incident at Massah (6:16). In chapter 8 Moses returns to the story of the manna in the wilderness, and in chapters 9-10 he again refers to the time at Sinai/Horeb and making of the golden calf” (Mann 2-3).

He goes on to claim in his commentary that “Remembering these stories is Israel’s way of knowing who they are and how they live. Forgetting these stories will lead to disaster.... When a people forgets its past, it is unable to understand its present or rightly to enter its future” (Mann 3). It makes sense. But while their past is overwhelmingly fraught with fear and pain and exile, you can see they are trying to focus on the ways in which God provided for and protected them. Through reflection of their trials, they can identify their strengths too. As we all should!

We should remember our roots both individually and collectively: they help keep us grounded, keep us strong, and give us direction... Did you know that our church is rooted in serving others through education dating all the way back to the very beginning of the 1800s? It began with a boy’s school by some of the very same men that also contributed to the start of Presbyterianism in Lynchburg (Bratton, 5-9). Educational systems were, and remain today, as an identifying marker that a

community was growing with signs of future promise. I think it is no coincidence that we have a Weekday School as a ministry of our church and were the first to make such a move too!

Historical records show “...in a sermon preached by the Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church on March 17, 1940, on the Sunday before the one hundred twenty-fifth birthday of this Church:

‘On March 20th, 1815 a disturbed and anxious world saw the triumphant entrance into Paris of the Emperor Napoleon returning from exile at Elba. Once more this dread dictator was to throw Europe into turmoil which would only end with his defeat at Waterloo.

‘By a strange coincidence on that same day in the little frontier town of Lynchburg, Virginia, there gathered an insignificant little group of God’s people, three men and ten women who had it in their hearts to establish a Presbyterian Church under the guidance of their leader, Rev. W. S. Reid.

‘In the revolutionary turmoil of that day so reminiscent of our own times with its wars and rumor of wars, with the overthrow of old systems of government and the rise of new and revolutionary nations had anyone been aware of both events, the re-establishment of Napoleon’s empire and the founding of the First Presbyterian Church of Lynchburg, which occurred on the same day, the second would have appeared of little moment beside the first.

‘But Napoleon’s Empire which startled the world was to endure for a brief one hundred days while the obscure little church whose establishment scarcely concerned one small town on the frontier of the new and struggling United States, was to endure for one hundred and twenty-five years, and at the end of that time celebrate its anniversary and look forward to another century of service to God and man. The empire of Napoleon was to end in destruction and death, but the church was to live to bring by its ministry Christ and His eternal life to thousands upon thousands not simply in Lynchburg but by its missionary zeal throughout the world.

‘So the kingdoms of this world come and go with spectacular demonstrations of seeming power while quietly the leaven of the Lord works through His church to establish that eternal Kingdom of our Lord and His Christ which shall never pass away’” (Bratton, 11-12).

And think about all we have endured, accomplished, overcome, and done to serve since that point in time! It’s evident today with our back-to-school drives of supplies for our Weekday School and food for our area school through Park View Community Mission—and that’s just a drop in the bucket!

So in remembering our roots, that’s what this final book of the Torah is all about as well: “The reinterpretation of stories and laws lies at the heart of the meaning of Deuteronomy. The book is a record of reevaluations of Israel’s central traditions in the light of changing situations, stretching over a period of at least several hundred years” (Mann 5). It’s interesting because Thomas Mann makes the other observation that “Chapters 1-9 have been concerned primarily with the vertical relationship between the Lord and Israel, with theology strictly construed. What follows certainly continues that concern but also takes up the horizontal relationships within the covenant community...” (Mann 105). It makes the parallel comparison with the first four commandments centering around our relationship with God—a vertical representation—and the last six commandments revolving around our relationship with others—a horizontal representation—making a full, intersecting, never-ending cross.

While the book is all about remembering and encouraging the Israelites to obey the commandments, keep holy, and build up the kingdom of God, “the primary motivation [for obedience] is a sense of gratitude that comes from being loved unconditionally and even despite one’s shortcomings, a gratitude rooted in the stories of God’s care and faithfulness...” (Mann 105). In short, we shouldn’t obey God and serve God just because we are told to—we should want to as a response to God’s unrelenting love, unwavering mercy, and abounding grace. God served the Israelites in so many countless ways, they reflect on how they can best serve God in return. So should we as followers of Christ!

Shirley Guthrie, a Presbyterian pastor and professor as well as the author of *Christian Doctrine*, has an entire section in his book entitled, “Are You a Christian? The Doctrine of Sanctification,” which includes sections entitled, “Christian Faith and Christian Action,” “In but Not of the World,” and “The Holiness Jesus Commands,” which I truly thought about just using in full as my sermon today because he says it all too well, in my opinion. I encourage you to read it for yourselves, but here’s a taste of Guthrie’s approach:

“The result of thinking that we can be saved or justified without obediently living as those who have been forgiven and saved is what Bonhoeffer calls ‘cheap grace.’² Cheap grace is grace without obedience. It means that we are not freed from our sins, but that we can settle down comfortable with them, assured that God will forgive, whatever we do—so long as we believe in the doctrine of justification.... ‘The upshot of it all is that my only duty as a Christian is to leave the world for an hour or so on a Sunday morning and go to church to be assured that my sins are forgiven.’

“The Christian answer to this split between justification and sanctification and the chap grace that follows from it is that there is no such thing as Christian faith without Christian action. To be justified or saved is to commit our whole lives to the God who justifies and saves us....To know God is to know the God who not only graciously forgives, accepts, and loves us as we are but has a claim on our lives.... To be elected or chosen by God is not to be given special privilege as God’s elite or only to be guaranteed salvation when we die. It is to be chosen in order to serve God here and now.... We

cannot know Christ as Savior *for* us without acknowledging him also as Lord *over* us. To have faith in him means inevitable also to follow him.... To receive the Holy Spirit is not just to get an emotional charge or to experience God’s nearness and love. It is to be renewed *to go to work*, living a different kind of life.... To belong to the church is not just to belong to a community of believers who come together only to ‘get something out of’ a church service, to be ‘fed’ and ‘blessed.’ It is to belong to a community of people who come together to be renewed so that they can go back into the world to serve God as they serve their fellow human beings” (Guthrie, 333-334).

It’s a call to serve—to be hospitable, to love, to lend a hand, to tithe, to give of your time. It’s a call to share in God’s love, joy, and peace in every way, shape, and form we possibly can! Because that’s the least we can strive to do in return for all God has done for us, right?

So now the practical questions: How should we serve? What does service look like? What does it entail? Cue the First Peter text! We used it a few weeks ago in light of being “Rooted in Love,” which was so fitting then, but it is for us today as well in this context of being “Rooted in Service!” In this letter, Peter is telling this church that “...living by the will of God involves a number of specific attitudes and patterns of behavior” (Craddock 67). Don’t you all want to strive to live by the will of God? I would hope so. And newsflash: that’s *exactly* what you are praying every single time you pray the Lord’s Prayer if you actually mean it: “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” In Peter’s letter, we are “see[ing] the household of faith as a matter of practice, not doctrine” as Eugene Boring matter-of-factly states (Boring 149). In other words: You can’t just talk the talk, you’ve got to walk the walk!

There are four “attitudes and patterns of behavior that constitute living by the will of God” within this letter as Fred Craddock enumerates. (Craddock 68).

1. “First is the disciplined life of prayer (v. 7). A consistent prayer life, that is, one which is not activated only in crisis, requires preparation, exercising faculties of mind, heart, will, and soul.”
2. “Second, turn toward each other in constant mutual love (v. 8).”
3. “Third, practice hospitality ungrudgingly and without complaining (v. 9).”
4. And last, but not least, which I want to dive a little deeper into is that “...living by the will of God means using the gifts God has granted in service to the common good (vv. 10-11). The word for ‘gift,’ *charisma*, does not refer to physical attractiveness or magnetic personality... but to some spiritual gift God has provided each member of the fellowship. Since each one has a gift (v. 10), the everyone is a charismatic; that is, each one has been equipped to serve. Paul spoke of many gifts (1 Corinthians 12; Rom. 12:3-8), but here only two are mentioned: speaking the word of God and serving. The word ‘serving’ is a general one, perhaps used deliberately to say that the form of service is determined by the needs of the other” (Craddock 68-69).

Surely we talk about our own individual gifts enough, don’t we? How the are gifts from God and we should use them to glorify God and spread God’s message and intentions of love, joy, and peace above all else? Right? I don’t mean to sound snarky. It can just feel like the topic gets old after hearing it so much, right? Well, it may be a message we hear frequently, but—I’ll echo Peter from a few weeks ago—we keep hearing it because we’re not yet doing a good enough job of it. “In this context [within First Peter] the mention of the gifts that each Christian has received (4:10-11), is also intended to emphasize their purpose in strengthening the Christian community.... Every Christian has received a gift, there is a variety of gifts, and the gifts are not for individual self-aggrandizement but for edification of the Christian community as a whole” (Boring 151). We should be using our individual gifts to serve each other, which, in turn, serves the entire community. We should be aware, be alert, be vigilant in identifying where we can step in to serve. After all, “the opposite of Christian love is not hate but indifference” (Boring 149). We cannot be indifferent to the needs as they emerge—however they emerge, whenever they emerge.

If you’ve heard any of my sermons, you’ve heard me mention that I’m a big believer in acknowledging both sides of the coin, so to speak. You can’t know good days without the bad days, you can’t truly appreciate joy without experiencing sadness, you can’t appreciate light without being in the darkness. So it is with our own individual strengths. We don’t know our own strengths until we witness someone else’s weakness. But flip that around! We don’t know our own weaknesses without witnessing someone else’s strength! We shouldn’t boast or be selfishly prideful about our own strengths, but humble in using them for God’s glory because we know that our weaknesses are sure to rear their ugly heads soon enough and we will need to rely on someone else’s God-given strength to pull through.

I feel like we as Christians, but even more so we in our privileged community here, are quick to jump to someone else’s need or aid. We want to be helpful. We want to feel useful, purposeful, beneficial—we want to feel needed. And it feels good to serve, doesn’t it? You can’t deny it... But how does it feel when you need to be served? Do you let people serve you? Come to your aid? Provide a meal? Relieve you of the kids for a couple hours? Deliver just-because flowers and not feel an ounce of indebtedness or immediate urge to pay back the kind gesture? It’s quite possible the most vulnerable thing you can do—to let people serve you. Sometimes you don’t even know you need a helping hand or an act of kindness until you experience it and it