

“Willingness”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 7, 2019

4th Sunday after Pentecost

Lamentations 3:22-26

Rev. John Wahl

Romans 12:1-3, 9-13

Pastor Wayne Younger, Executive Director of the Pittsburgh Project and our preacher in worship during this past week, presented the fitting analogy that the way God is at work in our lives is much like a home renovation. There are things in all of us that need to be fixed, and we all have decisions to make when trying to tackle our to-do lists.

In preparation for last week’s mission trip, we looked at these verses from Romans 12; specifically, we considered Paul’s instruction in the first verse that we should “present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” In preparing to do this on our trip, we recognized that we would not know ahead-of-time what kind of work we would be doing, nor would we know the exact conditions under which we would be doing it. We did not know whether or not our homeowner would be welcoming to us; or whether – for some reason or another – there would be barriers to overcome.

Thus, the importance of an attitude of willingness. Whatever the work to do, whatever relationships may or may not be possible, we would need to step into the week willing to take on what was set before us; knowing that we could and must be able to react to the situation we would encounter.

The second verse in this passage that we looked at was the eleventh, which reads: “do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.” Here, we were reminded that our attitude would have a lot to do with how well we were able to go about serving others. We could make a choice to work together, to encourage one another, and to remain positive in adversity. And as much as we wanted to have a good time and experience a feeling of accomplishment, the primary goal remained to give ourselves in service.

Again, this speaks to willingness: to allow ourselves to be used for a purpose greater than and beyond us. We had to – at the same time – be ready both to

surrender our own comfort and desires while also taking responsibility for our attitude and actions; controlling what we could, while placing what we could not control into God's hands. Thus, we were living out one of the great paradoxes of faith: *pray as if it all depends on us, work as if it all depends on God.*¹

Since the beginning of last month, we have been looking at the spiritual underpinnings of the Twelve Steps used in recovery programs. Step Four prescribed the creation of a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves, and Step Five called for sharing the exact nature of our wrongs with ourselves, with God, and with someone else. This week, we focus on Step Six – *Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.*

If we were to apply the home renovation analogy to this step, defects of character would be those personal traits that we have chosen to put on our fix-it list. The key to prioritizing this list is assessing what we are ready and willing to take on. It could be a big or small project; it may have an immediate or long-term timeline; it might be a difficult or easy task. But if we are not prepared to start and put in the necessary work, change probably is not going to happen.

We are not likely to change unless we are ready for it. And yet, the paradox remains that once we are ready for change, we must rely on God to provide the strength and courage to make those changes. This is a concept known as serenity; which means being able to feel what you feel and having the knowledge that what you feel and what you do about it are different things.²

The Serenity Prayer, written by theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, is commonly associated with recovery programs; it reads:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.

And yet, that is not the complete prayer. It continues:

...Living one day at a time; enjoying each moment at a time; accepting hardship as a pathway to peace; taking, as Jesus did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that You will make all things right if I surrender to Your Will; so that I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with you forever in the next. Amen.

¹ Richard Rohr, *Breathing Under Water*

² Terence Gorski, *Understanding the Twelve Steps*

God provides the courage that we need to make changes in our lives; to take on personal renovation projects; to remove defects of character; to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. In I Corinthians, Paul says that successful living requires daily dying. Not the death of ourselves, but some part of ourselves that is inhibiting us from living in the way we should, and in the way that God desires for us. We must be open to, willing to, and able to see the power of change in ourselves; realizing that there are many things, and other people, that we cannot change. The renovation project is for our own house, not for others on the block.

This week, our youth had the opportunity to live out Paul's wise words. In dying to their own desires – whether for the comforts of home, or sleeping in later, or doing jobs they wanted to rather than needed to – they have embodied right living: doing justice, loving kindness, and humbly walking with their God. In presenting their bodies as a living sacrifice, they were able to impact the life of our homeowner, Ms. Foster, in powerful and revealing ways. And with their zeal and ardent spirit, they experienced what it is like to be in God's service.

All of this is possible because, as a congregation, you have chosen to make investments of love and support for our young people. As has been our tradition, students and their families are asked to provide 1/3 of the costs of the mission trip, while the church covers the other 2/3. You welcome the inclusion of any young people who are willing to serve, rather than imposing membership requirements. And, you allow me to devote 100 percent of my time and energy for the week to accompany them on their journey.

As a small expression of recognition and thanks for these gifts of support, we have for you this morning some of the bread that was served at the Pittsburgh Project, made at a bakery near our site; which we will serve for communion. And so, as we come to the Lord's Table this morning, it is as one community which shares a common purpose, a common spirit, a common loaf. Our readiness and willingness to serve is not just personal, but shared. And the courage – that has been given to us by God – to step forward and take on our home renovation projects is mediated through one another.

Friends, let us come together to this Table, to share in bread that is Christ's body given for us; and to present our bodies – our strength and mind and spirit – as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. AMEN.