“You Are Worthy”
(Meditation presented on March 13, 2022)

Scripture:

Isaiah 55: 1-9

“Come, all you who are thirsty, 
come to the waters; 
and you who have no money, 
come, buy and eat! 

Come, buy wine and milk 
without money and without cost. 
Why spend money on what is not bread, 
and your labor on what does not satisfy? 

Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, 
and you will delight in the richest of fare. 
Give ear and come to me; 
listen, that you may live. 

I will make an everlasting covenant with you, 
my faithful love promised to David. 

See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, 
a ruler and commander of the peoples. 

Surely you will summon nations you know not, 
and nations you do not know will come running to you, 
because of the LORD your God, 
the Holy One of Israel, 
for he has endowed you with splendor.”

Seek the LORD while he may be found; 
call on him while he is near. 

Let the wicked forsake their ways 
and the unrighteous their thoughts. 

Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them, 
and to our God, for he will freely pardon. 

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, 
neither are your ways my ways,” 
declares the LORD. 

“As the heavens are higher than the earth, 
so are my ways higher than your ways 
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So, he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

“‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Meditation:

How is this “Full to the Brim” Lent theme is sitting with you? I want to share with you that I was quite intrigued initially. And I believe many of us are appreciating how this feels different from what we are used to do during Lent. This shift from ‘giving up’ something (as if emptying our hearts and minds to give room for what comes with Easter, or as acts of contrition for our sinful condition) to embracing the fullness of God’s Grace, is different, to say the least.

Last week, we meditated on how Jesus expands our definition of a full life. The focus was on the reality that there is a fuller life we are called to live. God’s grace washes over us like a river in the desert, and it fills us even when we struggle. Today we will focus on how God’s grace defines our worth and what that means for us.

I must confess to you that I wrestled quite a bit with the statement “You are worthy” as I prepared to be here today. Let me take you with me down my memory lane a bit to explain why:

I was born into a Christian/Presbyterian family of long tradition. I grew up in the church that started in my maternal great-grandmother’s tiny house, and that later gathered in a building that my maternal grandfather literally built (he was a sort of jack-of-all-trades, not-formally educated architect, civil-engineer, project manager, superintendent, and hands-on home builder). And I was raised by parents who, as far back as I can remember, were deeply involved in the church life, my dad serving as an elder for most of his adult life, and my mom being a Sunday school teacher until I was old enough to take over.

I suppose you can imagine that, consequently, my siblings and I grew up under a great deal of expectation for perfection from a religious perspective. And we were very well-behaved kids. We memorized lots of Bible verses that were often recited back to us to remind us why we needed to behave well:
“The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, 
keeping watch on the wicked and the good.” Proverbs 15:3

“The Lord sees everything you do, 
and he watches where you go.” Proverbs 5:21

“Go watch the ants, you lazy person. 
Watch what they do and be wise.” Proverbs 6:6

God was watching us; therefore, we needed to be in our best behavior; and we needed to be productive, otherwise we would suffer consequences. It was engrained in our mental models that if we did something wrong, consequently, bad things would happen to us (God’s punishment); and good things should always happen to us if we were good. To this day, I still catch myself replying to those old tapes in my head more often than I care to admit.

I remember one time when I was still very young, I skinned my knee badly and could not figure out what I had done to deserve that. My mom helped me by saying that I hadn’t actually done anything wrong, but perhaps I was thinking about it... So, as you see, there was no way to escape!

I also learned from my great-grandmother, grandfather, and parents (but mostly from my mom, as you may already be thinking), that unless a person is always doing something useful and productive, their sense of worth is not good enough.

While we learned a lot that “Jesus Loves me, for the Bible tells me so” as kids in Sunday School, once we became teenagers and adults, the focus shifted to Scriptures that emphasize the importance of ‘producing fruit’; and these passages were memorized and applied to daily live, and eventually seem to have overshadowed more comforting and Grace-filled passages like:

“Look at the birds. They don’t plant or harvest, they don’t have storerooms or barns, but God feeds them. And you are worth much more than birds.” Luke 12:24

“I can lie down and go to sleep, 
and I will wake up again, 
because the Lord gives me strength.” Psalm 3:5

“The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

He makes me lie down in green pastures, 
he leads me beside quiet waters, 
he refreshes my soul.” Psalm 23:1-3

Consequently, no wonder I wrestled so much with today’s passage, in the context of the Full to the Brim theme.

I have encountered and reflected on this passage other times, and the focus, at least in my head, has mostly been on: “Let’s give the fig tree another chance to bear fruit and if not, cut it down.” Think of it... how does this
hit you? Does it give you hope or cause you to fear? Do you think: “What a blessing! I’ll be nurtured so I can bear fruit,” or you go, like in my own head: “I better bear fruit, or else!”

As I studied the Full to the Brim sermon planning guide to prepare for today, I found myself struggling to reconcile the old messages in my mind, the old interpretations of this passage, and this new concept that the fig tree can still be worthy of the gardener’s care even if it does not produce fruit.

I don’t think the messages from my childhood, are much different than what the folks who were listening to Jesus at that point had in their minds. “What did the people killed by Pontius Pilate, or who perished under the tower that fell, do to deserve death?” That is the well-known “Bad things happen to bad people; Good things happen to good people” mentality.

To our relief, Jesus’s answer to his disciples nearly 2000 years ago also applies to us now and can help us reframe our understanding of how God deals with humanity. It challenges us to let go of the transactional interpretation of God’s relationship with humankind (“if this... then that”) and embrace God’s extraordinary Grace. As the authors of the Full to the Brim resources would say: without denying or ignoring sin and suffering, or releasing accountability for human wrongdoing, this passage of the Gospel of Luke can help us begin to re-contextualize our faith. It invites us to wonder: “If Love is our beginning, how can we live our lives led by Love’s promises?” If we belong to God, and He loves us so much, to the point of finding us worthy of sacrificing His Son for us, how can we “increase our capacity to receive and give Grace”?

The example of the grace given to the fruitless fig tree in the parable give us a lot to think about. How come an unproductive tree is not only spared but also promised such special treatment?

The lesson of the fig tree invites us to rethink our understanding of what makes us worthy before God, and also in the context of our cultural systems that measure a person’s worthiness by their behaviors, what they can produce, their output, their achievements, their possessions, how they look like, who they associate with or even who they love. We live in a culture that values ‘being busy’ and undervalues ‘rest.’ How many of us here worked for decades thinking that they were ‘earning their right to rest’ in retirement? And then, even in retirement, still feel like they must be productive to feel worthy?

In my line of work with the Samaritan Counseling Center, a weak sense of self-worth, or the total lack of it, is often at the core of most mental health problems; and many enter a crisis when they lose a job. That has become much more visible and critical since the start of the COVID pandemic, as our ways of living were subsequently impacted by it. Many people lost jobs, many had their workload increase dramatically, many found out that they can work at a slower pace, and many are still trying to figure out what the new normal looks like before the next normal looms over us. At Samaritan, our whole team is feeling exhausted; and most of us are struggling to give ourselves permission to rest because we all see so many people in need our help. But how much more can we pour out if our own cups are getting empty?

And it’s like that for all of us here too. How many of us may be feeling like the fig tree in the parable at this point in our lives, with a canopy that may be full of leaves, but with barren branches? Looking good from a certain distance, and deep in our hearts struggling to feel we are worthy? Not giving ourselves permission to rest and
be restored because we are clinging to a partial understanding of God’s love for us that keeps us arrested to the fear that if we don’t bear fruit we will be punished or be discarded? Can we accept Jesus’ message that we are worthy of God’s love and extra care for us even if we don’t produce fruits? And can we allow ourselves to expand our capacity to receive and give Grace, as we give ourselves permission to recognize our need to rest, and let ourselves be tended by the loving Gardener because we are Worthy to Him?

Jesus’ response to the disciples still applies to us: we will perish unless we repent. And the original Greek meaning for ‘repent’ is “to have a transformative change of heart.” We will not perish because we will be discarded or punished by God, but because we will likely wilt and succumb exhausted by the weight of our own human sense of unworthiness. We will succumb because of our inability to receive and enjoy God’s grace and to give it to others, which is one of the most worthy fruits we can produce.

As we leave this service today, may we let the lesson of the fig tree take root in our hearts and minds. May we surrender to our Loving God all we know about what makes us worthy. May God help us repent – have a transformative change of heart – so we can let go of the fear of not being worthy of God’s grace, and of not being worthy as measured by human values. May this transformation allow us to rest and be restored under God’s care, so that we may come to produce and give to others the fruits of living under God’s unconditional Love and amazing Grace. Amen.


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