

19th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C,
Stewardship Series
October 16, 2022
St. Charles Ave Presbyterian Church
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson
Psalm 1
Matthew 7:24-27

Standing Strong

Earlier this week I took my son, Chance, and my parents to his first visit to the Audubon Zoo – or any zoo for that matter. It was a big day! And while he was busy enthusiastically pointing at animals and identifying what sounds lions and monkeys make, I took the opportunity to let my inner biology nerd out and enjoyed reading informational plaques placed around the zoo to educate the public on the flora and fauna in each habitat. In the Louisiana Swamp lands, we saw a very playful black bear, there were raccoons looking a little out of place in a zoo habitat rather than our backyard, and of course in the water we spotted those tell-tale eyes and snouts of the alligators barely visible above the surface amidst the camouflage of duck weed. Punctuating the beauty of the landscape were several large bald cypress trees – which I learned is the Louisiana State Tree – a fact which I'm sure many of you who grew up here have known since you were in elementary school. I learned that Cypress trees grow on average to be around 100 feet tall and their roots grow horizontally to capture nutrients from the waters in which they live. Cypress wood is very prized, not only for its strength and hardness, but also for its natural resistance to rot and termites. They play a crucial role in the ecosystem of the swamp and wetlands, providing shelter for both birds up in its branches and fish and other swamp creatures down around its roots. Cypress help keep the soil from eroding and are a

natural barrier to flood waters.¹ So in reflecting for now a 2nd week on Psalm 1 and this image of a tree planted by streams of water, I think from now on my mind's eye will always conjure up this image of a cypress tree growing strong in the swamp waters.

In addition to our tree image, in today's scripture readings we have 2 similar dichotomies being set up here that center on different responses to God's word or God's law. In Psalm 1 there are the "happy ones" and the "wicked." Psalm 1 speaks of those who are happy because they "delight in the law of the Lord" and "meditate on his law day and night." Happiness is more than just a delightful circumstance or emotion. The Hebrew word that is being used here for happiness derives from a verb that means "to go straight or advance." Similarly, the word used for meditate has a deeper quality than simply reading the Bible or a purely intellectual Bible Study, it has a connotation of acting meaningfully and intentionally towards God's guidance. The "happy ones" are fruitful and prosperous because they are being led by God's guidance in their lives in ways that are thoughtful and intentional. The wicked in contrast seem to follow their own path, and once again a Hebrew word study reveals to us that the word here used for "perish" is also used to say one has "strayed away" or "wandered about."² Their ways, their lives, are like the useless chaff off of wheat – shaken off in the time of harvesting and scattered to the wind. Their path, apart from God, is one that ultimately leads to nothing of real substance.

¹ <https://www.nwf.org/Educational-Resources/Wildlife-Guide/Plants-and-Fungi/Bald-Cypress>
<https://www.arborday.org/trees/treeguide/treedetail.cfm?itemID=787>

² Bouzard, Walter C., "Commentary on Psalm 1." *Working Preacher*.
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-23-3/commentary-on-psalm-1-7>

In our passage from Matthew we hear the perhaps familiar tale of the wise man who built his home on the rock and the foolish man who built his home on the sand. The strong foundation of rock anchors the house, it is then able to withstand the worst a storm can throw at it, whereas the house on the sand has nothing to cling to and is destroyed. This parable comes at the end of Jesus' sermon on the mount, much of which is about the law and its fulfillment in Jesus' life and his teachings. And these words, Jesus emphasizes, serve no purpose if they are only heard and not acted upon.

In both texts, our groups are separated by their how they receive and act on the word of God or God's law in their lives. Naturally when we speak of God's Law or even the Word of God, we tend to think of the law strictly as rules, as hard line of right and wrong, thou shall and thou shalt not. We forget that the gift of the Torah, the Word, is more than just a set of laws meant to govern our behavior, it's instruction and guidance. God has set out for us in the Law the very best ways to live, and God desires to guide us along our path, teaching and encouraging us every step of the way.

Over the past several months my husband and I have been met with a new challenge in our parenthood journey because sometime in the last year our cherub cheeked baby has turned into a full-blown toddler. It used to be that our main job was just to keep him alive – feed him, change him, shelter him and keep him safe. Now the job of parenting is rapidly changing and growing in responsibility. Not only is the keeping him alive piece that much harder as Chance has no sense of fear or danger, but also now he has opinions and thoughts and a growing vocabulary. It's now our job to really start teaching him, not just his ABCs and colors, but about the world – what's dangerous and what's safe, and how to live – what's right from wrong, and

everything in between. Now I am at the very beginning of all this and I know I still have so much to learn, but among the things that I have learned so far, as I figure out just what kind of parent I want to be, is that it's not my job to make everything in life easy for my child, to make sure that he is never met with struggles and is always happy. Instead, it is my job to teach him resiliency – to help him develop tools for coping with and building a tolerance for struggle. Now I'm not talking about toughening him up and making things unnecessarily harder for him, but helping him navigate the disappointments and loss and loneliness that is a part of growing up, that is a part of being human, so that in those moments he knows that he is seen and known and loved, and because of that he has within him a well of strength that he can rely on throughout his whole life.

God's word also does this for us. The kind of strength that is found in hearing and acting on God's word is resilience. In the expressions of joy, gratitude, sorrow, anger, and grief in the psalms our own emotions and experiences are validated. In the stories of the people Israel from their captivity in Egypt, to their wanderings in the desert, to their exile and separation, to the disciples of early church, in their struggles and overwhelming challenges and pain, we see God's faithfulness and our own hope is renewed, as we are reminded of God's love and care for us. Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, exemplified with his life and in his teachings, what it means to completely embody the law and to perfectly follow in God's ways. And on the cross and in his resurrection Christ demonstrated God's true strength and power – not in a show of violence or force, but in self-emptying service, and sacrifice.

The prophet Jeremiah says that the day of the Lord is coming, and God will write the law within us, write the law on our hearts. There will be no need to even teach the law, because it

will just be a natural part of just who we are. But until that day we do have to teach it to one another and learn together how we embody this word, not just in our individual lives, but in our life as a community of faith, as the people of God.

One last fun fact about Bald Cypress trees. You've probably seen around them growing out of the water little stubby knobs, or what I thought were just baby cypress trees, but are in fact part of the tree's root system and they are called Cypress knees. Cypress trees only develop knees when they grow in swamps and wetlands and marshes, and it's not known exactly what the purpose knees serve for the Cypress tree. So the waters that nourish the cypress trees, also change their very structure, and this change is kind of mysterious and strange. So now let us be like a grove of cypress trees planted by streams of water, nourished... sustained... changed... by the word God.

Charge - Let the word of Christ¹⁶ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.