



The Wind in the Trees

Job 42:1-6 & Matthew 6:19-21

Pentecost 23 - October 27, 2024

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Today is, as you know, Commitment Sunday. On this Sunday we consider our part in the financial support of the ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ here at First Presbyterian Church. It is a holy commitment that we make today; a pledge to support the work of the people as we respond to the work of God in our lives and in the lives of others. It is one of my favorite days of the year, for here, now, we act as one body, as the people of God, and re-envision, at least for the moment, what living out our faith in response to God in Jesus Christ means for our pocketbooks and for our lives.

There's an old pastoral joke that still has traction amongst congregations, or at least, with preachers. It is said that one morning, during a pledge drive, a pastor stepped into the pulpit and said:

Today, I have some good news and some bad news for you in regards to our current financial pledge drive. The good news is that we have the money to fully fund the budget and bring about all those ministries and opportunities that we envision. We have more than enough to reach our goals.

He then paused for dramatic effect and said:

The bad news? Well, the bad news is that all that funding is still in your pockets.

I guess, it is a matter of perspective. If the funding that is needed is still in the pockets of the parishioners, then can any one say that the goal had really been reached? However, that pastor, whoever he was, saw things differently I suppose that we usually see things. He saw things from the eyes of faith; seeing beyond the visible proof to an invisible force that he was sure was at work in the congregation he served.

Eugene Peterson, in his landmark book, *Christ Plays in a Thousand Places*, wrote of such things citing a great British writer in so doing:

G.K. Chesterton once said that there are two kinds of people in the world: When trees are waving wildly in the wind, one group of people thinks that it is the wind that moves the trees; the other group thinks that the motion of the trees creates the wind. The former view was the one held by most of humankind through most of its centuries; it was only in recent years, Chesterton said, that a new breed of people had emerged who blandly hold that it is the movement of trees that create the wind. The consensus had always held that the invisible is behind and gives the energy to the visible; Chesterton in his work as a journalist, closely observing and commenting on people and events, reported with alarm that the broad consensus had fallen apart and that the modern majority naively assumes that what they see and hear and touch is basic reality and generates whatever people come up with that cannot be verified with the senses. They think that the visible accounts for the invisible.

The point being is that modern and post-modern society does not ascribe to the activity in this world a God who animates and energizes all of life, including our own life.

Sometimes Stewardship Committees and pastors can be tempted to believe that it is the motion of the trees that cause the wind rather than the other way round. We consider various programs and plans, themes and convincing talks, to be the prime motivator in causing the congregation to give more faithfully, to render a better stewardship of their resources, and the deficit of budgets to be closed. All accomplished by the

things that we do as committees and officers of the church and pastors. The truth could not be further from the truth.

We believe that it is God who motivates you to action in all areas of life, good responsible stewardship and commitment to the work of Christ to be only one of those things.

In the passage from Job this morning, we heard these amazing words:

Hear, O God, and I will speak; I will question you, and you declare to me.' I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you ...

Job comes to the point of seeing that it is the wind that causes the motion of the trees and not the other way round. It is God who is active in this world and not just Job's efforts and work to accomplish what he sees as important. Job admits that up to that point, he had heard of God and the goodness of God, but now he sees, actually sees, the goodness of God operative in his own life. And this realization, this new vision, if you would, causes a change to happen in Job. He sees things differently now.

This is what happens to us in our consideration of good and responsible Christian stewardship of the resources we have been given. We begin to let loose a bit, not to cling to what we think we have and possess for fear that there is no other source or resource for life. We see that THE resource for life, for our very living, is God in Jesus Christ: the wind in the trees ...

William Willimon once related a story from his own life that I find instructive. He explained that he worked three jobs through undergraduate so he wouldn't burden his parents and because he knew he was headed to a pricey divinity school following graduation. He saved his money, every dime so that they wouldn't be faced with still more financial burden, then he discovered that most of his tuition was covered by scholarship. So, Willimon took what he had saved and bought a shiny new Honda Civic to get him to Duke Divinity School. Here's where Willimon picks up the story:

I was proud. I washed it every week. When the time came to start divinity school I packed it full of stuff and moved to Durham, North Carolina, into a neighborhood called Duke Manor.

Duke Manor may sound like a ritzy kind of place to live, but it wasn't. It was actually pretty rough. The week after I moved in, the building next to mine was raided. It was the largest heroin bust in Durham history. There were always rumors circulating about cars being vandalized, broken into, or stolen altogether.

I parked mine right under my bedroom window to keep tabs on it. Occasionally, I'd walk by the window and peer out. Every time there was a noise in the parking lot, I'd sit straight up in bed and do some quick surveillance of the parking lot. There was constantly noise in the parking lot.

After several restless nights, exhaustion set in and I said to the Lord, 'Lord, I can't keep this up. I came here to divinity school to grow in my faith, draw closer to you, learn your scriptures, and learn how to be a leader in your church. I spend all hours of the day in class and studying and then I'm awakened all hours of the night worried about my car in this rough neighborhood. Something's got to give.

After a short pause, the Lord replied, 'Yes, yes, it does.'

The implication is obvious; the Civic either has to go or Willimon has to adopt a different attitude toward for certainly his heart was in his treasure ... it was just the wrong treasure.

Jesus asks us all where our heart really lies. He suggests that we make that judgment based upon our treasure in life; where do we place our resources? To what do we give ourselves both financially and emotionally? Where our treasure is, there our heart will be as well.

And today, we do just that ...