

May 21, 2017

Scripture: Acts 17:22-28

Message: Live. Move. Be.

Pastor Leslie Wood

I read a story that was written about a woman whose daughter kept calling her. She'd say: "Mother, you must come see the daffodils before they're gone." For various reasons, the woman was reluctant to go. One was the two-hour drive from her home in Laguna, CA to her daughter's home in Lake Arrowhead, CA. She just didn't feel up to making that drive.

Finally, after the third call, she gave in. "I'll come next Tuesday."

While "next Tuesday" dawned cold and rainy, hardly an ideal day for travel, the woman had promised. So, she got in her car and drove to her daughter's. Even after arriving and being swarmed with love by her grandchildren, still the woman was reluctant to drive any further to see a plot of flowers. It just didn't seem worth it. Her daughter, however, wouldn't take "no" for an answer.

After about 20 minutes up a mountain road, they turned onto a small gravel road and the woman saw a small church. On the far side of the church, there was a hand-lettered sign that read, "Daffodil Garden." They all got out of the car and the woman followed her daughter and grandchildren down the path. When they turned a corner on the path, and the woman looked up and gasped. Before her lay the most glorious sight. It looked as though someone had taken a great vat of gold and poured it down over the mountain peak and slopes. The flowers were planted in majestic, swirling patterns - great ribbons and swaths of deep orange, white, lemon yellow, salmon pink, saffron and butter yellow. Each different-colored variety was planted as a group so that it swirled and flowed like its own river with its own unique hue. There were five acres of flowers.

The daughter explained that the stunning array of flowers was due to the efforts of just one woman, who lived in a modest, well-kept A-frame house in the midst of all that glory. They walked up to the house and read the information that the daffodil-lady had placed on the patio. They read:

"Answers to the Questions I Know You Are Asking" was the headline. The first answer was: "50,000 bulbs". The second answer was, "One at a time, by one woman. Two hands, two feet and very little brain." The third answer was, "Began in 1958."

That moment was a life-changing experience for the woman. She thought of the daffodil-lady, who, more than 40 years before, had begun - one bulb at a time - to bring her vision of beauty and joy to an obscure mountaintop. Just planting those bulbs, year after year, had changed the world around her and for the thousands of people who drove up the mountain to soak in the beauty that she had cultivated. This woman had created something of ineffable magnificence, beauty and inspiration.¹

¹ <http://forums.gardenweb.com/discussions/1857973/the-daffodil-principle>

The daffodil-lady had a love of beauty, a trust of nature, and just a little bit of a green thumb. This was her gift. Her talent. Her mountainside of daffodils was her expression of thanks; an awareness of something intrinsically beautiful and vital and life-giving. And here's something that the daffodil-lady inherently understood. Giving of yourself, offering your gifts for something that is bigger and beyond yourself, is life-enriching, for you and for others as well.

Paul knew just a little bit about incremental, daily effort. He knew that cultivating that which matters, that which is beyond himself, takes commitment. It takes time. And it takes an intentional attitude of offering ourselves and our gifts to cultivate and nurture the good of the church, the good of others, the good of our community, the good of the world.

The Paul we meet in the book of Acts was hardly what we'd think of as a candidate for spreading the Gospel of Love anywhere, much less across the larger part of the Mediterranean world. Paul, himself, admitted that he was a "blasphemer, a persecutor and a man of violence". No one would have foretold that Paul, or Saul as he was first known, would embrace the radical teachings of a controversial Jewish subversive who was executed as a common criminal a few years earlier by the Romans. Yet, after his conversion, he went from being the foremost persecutor of Christ followers, to arguably the main catalyst for the explosive spread of Christianity.

Undoubtedly, Paul had very distinct gifts. Highly educated. A skilled teacher. Singular vision. Tenacious. Total commitment. Some degree of oratory skill. And he was brilliant at follow-through. But Paul freely admitted that he was a follower of Jesus not because of his upstanding behavior in the past but because of God's mercy and grace. It was precisely Paul's past behavior that made him an ideal candidate for work he would do in the future. Think about it -- who knows more about creating secure banks than a former bank robber?

Did you ever see the movie *Catch Me If You Can*? It's the true story of Frank Abagnale, the 17-year-old who ran away from home and perfected the art of check forgery, fraud and impersonation, all before he turned 22 years old. Before he was arrested he had successfully impersonated several identities, including a pilot, a physician and a lawyer. Abagnale, because of his great skill in impersonating others and ability to forge checks totaling in the millions, served less than 5 years of his 12-year sentence, before being released to work with the federal government as a security consultant.

Paul and Abagnale had similar stories, in that the gifts that made them not-so-good in their former lives, were the same gifts that made them good in their reformed lives. And the thing is, they both understood their gifts and didn't hesitate to use them.

Paul's trip into Athens took a familiar pattern. First, he made connections in the Jewish synagogue, then he went out among the Gentiles. Paul was particularly gifted at making connections, opening avenues to be able to witness to the love and grace of God found in Jesus the Christ. In Athens, building those initial bridges came easily. Paul first recognized, then appealed to, the Athenian love of learning new things...and often those new things had to do with philosophy and religion, ideas about the gods...even the unknown ones. "I see your altar to the unknown god. Let me tell you about that God, the one you already worship, but you don't yet understand."

Paul's unique gift that he readily used, time and time again, was his recognition of peoples' deep-seeded need, and his ability to introduce a God of mercy and grace that could meet their need. Combine this with Paul's singular vision, tenaciousness and total commitment, and he was able to accomplish remarkable achievements for God and the development and strengthening of God's church.

Here's the thing to note. Paul never quit. He never got to the point where he said "Ok. I've done enough. I've served my time. I deserve to sit back and focus on me and my needs now." He used his specific gifts and talents over and over again, to serve God, to serve God's people and to build and nurture God's church until his last breath.

And he did that, because Paul had figured it out. There is never anything that we can do, anything that we can buy, anything that we can experience or enjoy that will last and uphold us over our whole lives, *except* for those things which cultivate our relationship with God. Paul told the people of Athens, "God made us all different. All diverse. And God allows each culture to have its own time to develop, giving each its own place to live and thrive in its distinct ways. Yet, God's purpose in all this was that people of every culture and religion would search for this ultimate God...grope for God. Yet, in truth, God is not far from any of us. For you know the saying, "We *live* in God; we *move* in God; we *exist* in God."

Paul understood that our relationship with God is active. Like Paul, you are created with unique abilities...talents...gifts that are wholly yours. But your talents and gifts aren't simply to be cultivated and utilized for your personal benefit. They are to be cultivated and utilized for God, and God's people, and God's church. That is at once both simply and remarkably the reason you promise, when you join the church, to serve God and UCSJ with your talents. The pulse of the ministry here beats because of you. The church is vital if and only if you contribute to make it vital.

The daffodil-lady, living modestly along a gravel road near a church, down a little path, spent her life creating something beautiful. In her case, it took several decades, 50,000 daffodil bulbs and the work of her hands and feet. There was no other way to do it. One bulb at a time. No shortcuts, simply loving the slow process of planting. Loving the work as it unfolded. Loving an achievement that grew so slowly and that bloomed for only three weeks of each year. Still, just planting one bulb at a time, year after year, had changed the world for herself and countless others.

"We should have the same attitude as was in that lady," to paraphrase Paul. Because here's the thing. Like Paul...and like the daffodil-lady...if you keep at it. If you keep offering your unique gifts and talents to serve God, *if you love the work as it unfolds*, then God will use you to create something beautiful and lasting.

People, like daffodils, were created to bloom. One day, alone on a mountain, St. Francis came across a solitary jonquil blooming through the rocks. He sat and marveled at its beauty and realized that this is what is meant to glorify God: simply to be what we are intended to be." To *live*. To *move*. To *be* in God.

Let us pray. God of life and breath and being. You hold nothing back from us. Help us to hold nothing back from you. Amen.