

Sunday, August 23, 2015 - Living the Life: Cooperate with God

Psalm 84

Marysville UMC

Pastor Jenny Smith

We continue our series on Living the Life. We've explored what changes when we show up to our lives and to God even when we don't feel ready. We talked about giving our full attention and being fiercely present to our lives. And we wondered what God could do with a church who gave their full attention to a few things, instead of getting distracted with every opportunity. Today, we look at what it means to cooperate with God.

During college, Aaron and I were a part of a campus ministry and a group of friends we loved. We organized a mission trip to Atlanta during a fall break. It was an ecumenical group led by one of our Baptist friends. It was here I was introduced to using a tract, a handout with an explanation of the Gospel, to use as I spoke with people. I remember not feeling comfortable but going along with it anyways. So we would set up games, give away food at an apartment complex and play with all the kids. Then we would put on a skit about God and making the choice to put your trust in God. Then we'd sit down with kids who had raised their hand saying they were interested in learning more about Jesus. I remember reading through the tract with one girl, about 9 years old. I know my 21-year-old self meant well. But looking back now, I operated as if these people didn't know about God until I told them.

It's as if we think we can put God in a backpack and take God to people. Now, please here that I'm not being critical of mission trips. Most of them are wonderful. We travel to a new place, learn from new people, serve with them, lives are changed, connections are made. That's a great thing.

I'm talking more about the subtle attitude that develops in our lives when we think we've got the corner on God knowledge and we're going to dispense it to another person. That the experience we've had of God is superior and "those other people" should feel honored that we would share it. "Those other people" aren't just strangers in another land. They're our family members, neighbors, kids and friends.

When we act like we're taking God to people, it puts us in control of the relationship. Which we love. But it also reeks of manipulation and takes a surprisingly large amount of energy to pull off. In the book of John, the author reminds us, "Jesus must increase, I must decrease." It might feel good to think we're in control, but we will not get very far in our discipleship journey operating this way.

I have some good news for each of you this morning. And for myself. The writer of the Psalms pours out to God, "how lovely is your dwelling place." Where is the dwelling place of God? Everywhere. In every rock, tree, bird, city, child, adult, cloud, rain drop. Everywhere. I heard someone say one time, "heaven is not a zip code." Genesis tells the story that we're all created in the image of God. Which means that all these people running around Marysville and surrounding communities are already connected to God in some way. They may not all be in touch with it at the moment. But the image of God is a part of them. **And when this becomes part of our everyday perspective, it changes everything. We become people who are cooperating with what God is already doing in the world, instead of creating the agenda ourselves.**

[SLIDE] Thomas Merton, a wise author, once said: "We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent and the divine is shining through it all the time."

One of my parenting goals is to help our children develop a sense of reverence and awe for our world. We often pause in the middle of our routine to notice and observe. Flowers starting to bloom,

spiders and their web on the glass sliding door, sitting on the front porch and listening to the rain, watching the clouds go by. In helping them notice and name the beauty of God's creation, I find I'm noticing it a lot more, too.

On Thursday, I took the whole day to read, study, pray, write and be quiet. It was glorious. I came across this paraphrase of Psalm 37: "I have seen the greedy ones, their ways are overbearing, they puff themselves up with pride. When I pass them, I see only an inflated balloon; even so, I take time to honor the Divine Spark hidden within them." (Psalms for Praying, Psalm 37).

There are people, places, situations and things that are very difficult for us to love. How do we continue to become people who honor the Divine Spark hidden inside them? Because they are a dwelling place of God.

I have trouble seeing the image of God in spiders, moles, cranky and whining kids, bad traffic, anybody who happens to be around me when I'm hungry. What about you?

It's not easy to see the image of God in every dwelling place, but what changes when we believe God is already at work in someone's life?

We get to be the noticers. The namers. The highlighters. We pronounce blessings, we name the presence of God. We're not bringing the holiness - **we're recognizing it's already there.** "Look! God is here! And here! And here!" This changes the notion of much of our mission work. We're not supplying God to people, to kids looking for clothes. We get to point out that God is already at work in their life. The presence of a prayer quilt on someone's lap doesn't magically bring God into their life. It helps them notice God is already at work inside of them.

We're not making God moments happen - we're noticing and naming they already exist.

In church, we bless lots of things - bread, juice, babies, kids, confirmands, adults, the dying, marriages, teachers, leaders. I've blessed cars, animals, new buildings, new homes.

The practice itself of noticing and naming changes how you see people and things around you. Instead of distractions and frustrations, you learn to see holiness.

If every thing and person already contains the spirit of God, then we're not taking God to anyone, which means this: The pressure is off. We don't have to define God for people. Prove God's existence. Or force anyone to do anything. We're not forcing God onto anyone. **It's freeing to trust God to do God's work!**

My dad often mentioned his job as a pastor and spiritual leader was to notice the rustlings of the Holy Spirit and respond.

Another way to say that: **"What is God doing in this place? Whatever that is, go ask if you can help."**

When we look around our community, church or family and ask, "Where is the energy? What makes this place come alive?" The answers we hear are an indicator that God is at work. We ask questions, we listen. I hope you've been in a meeting or situation where, almost as if out of nowhere, there was energy in the room. Excitement. Things that felt confusing at first started to come together. Energy. It's also called the Holy Spirit. **Follow the energy.**

The flip side of the coin is tough. We must let go of the things that don't have energy. Which is surprisingly hard to do.

This is tough when we've had such a powerful experience of God. We want others to experience the same thing we did. During seminary, I helped start a ministry called The Gathering for young adults. We built a team, got organized, dreamed about what our time together would look like. We all felt deeply connected and it was meaningful. You could feel the Holy Spirit energy when we were together. But after about a year, someone moved away, someone's work schedule changed and they couldn't come. The energy started to fade. A core group was left - frustrated and exhausted from trying to make it keep working. We could have graciously brought the ministry to a close, giving thanks to God for all that it did, recognizing there's a season for everything. But several of us held on for a while. The energy was gone but it was so hard to let go. I still remember the day I realized it was okay to bring the group to an end and it didn't mean it was a failure. God was present, the energy was there. And then it changed. And it was going to be okay to try something new again.

I've seen this happen in several churches. But remember, if we follow the energy - we're following the Spirit - we're believing God is already at work and we get to join in that work. It's so freeing and liberating to not be on our own to "make something happen!"

The other wonderful thing that happens when we cooperate with what God is already doing is this. **People get to be just people.** They're not an attendance number, a statistic or a target demographic. They're just people who want to connect, belong and change the world. And when we see people like that, we're naming and noticing them as a dwelling place of God. Can you imagine the resurrection that could come from seeing people like that?!

And by the way, if this is truly your perspective, people pick up on it. We can usually sense when someone is being manipulative or when they genuinely are trying to see the real us. It's a gift we give others as the body of Christ. Because most of us just want someone to see the real us and love us anyways.

So the next time you feel compelled to bring God to someone, remember this: Jesus does the healing - not us. Jesus looks at a heart full of hate, bitterness and fear and melts it - not us. Yes, Jesus loves people through us - through what we do - but may we never forget Jesus, God, the Holy Spirit are doing the resurrection work in each of us. When we remember to cooperate with God, instead of secretly expecting God to follow our agenda - it changes everything - about how you move through your own life - and how a church moves in the world. Our work together continues. Amen.