

26th Sunday Ord Time/Year C
September 29, 2019
Ps. 91; Jer. 32:1-3a,6-15; 1 Tim 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31
Rising Strong Sermon 4 of 4
“Wholeheartedness”

Today we bring our Rising Strong series to a close with the encouragement to live wholehearted lives. We began with the challenge to be vulnerable, specifically by cultivating the courage to risk vulnerability. Next we learned about reckoning, which is learning to walk into our stories, and I challenged us to live with holy curiosity.

After reckoning, we focused on rumbling which is learning how to own our stories. I challenged us to be creative in learning how to own them, creativity that is vulnerable, courageous, and curious. Today’s message is a call to wholeheartedness. It is so vital to who we are as God’s people, I challenge us to start a revolution in ourselves and in the church by choosing wholehearted living. Wholeheartedness is complete sincerity and commitment. We are all invited today to live this way of life, loving the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, all our might and love our neighbor as ourselves. On these, Jesus says, hang all the law and the prophets.

Let’s turn to God’s word.

1 Timothy 6:6-19

⁶Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; ⁷for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; ⁸but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these. ⁹But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. ¹¹But as for you, man of God, shun all this; pursue

righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. ¹²Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called and for which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

¹³In the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, I charge you ¹⁴to keep the commandment without spot or blame until the manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵which he will bring about at the right time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords. ¹⁶It is he alone who has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. ¹⁷As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

The word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God!*

I love the show *The West Wing*. It tells the story of the fictional presidency of Jed Bartlet. In the show, Toby Zeigler is the Bartlet administration's communications director, a grumpy, almost joyless man with a strange combination of optimism about the ability of government to do good and pessimism about the people doing the governing.¹ Despite this, though, he's somehow quirky and loveable. One of my favorite Toby scenes in the show is when he meets his newborn twins for the first time. Crotchety old Toby looks at those babies and says, "I didn't realize babies come with hats. You guys crack me up. You don't have jobs. You can't walk or speak the

¹ <https://decider.com/2017/05/02/10-best-toby-episodes-of-the-west-wing/>

language. You don't have a dollar in your pockets, but you got yourselves a hat so everything's fine."² It reminds me of what Paul tells Timothy: we brought nothing into the world. We are born completely dependent on other people, with nothing at all but the little hats on our heads that the hospital plunks on, but everything is fine. Why? I think it's because we are fresh and unbroken, unafraid of our dependence, whole, wholehearted and whole selves, close to God. It does seem to me that wholeheartedness has to do with proximity to the divine, oneness with God, focusing on Jesus.

In this episode, the twins' birth is juxtaposed with a White House crisis involving the president's youngest daughter who has been kidnapped. We are born with hats, but we don't keep them long. Nearly immediately the world begins its work on us, telling us that our hats are not enough; that we will need so much more. Life tells us that we should trust the human parts of our hearts more than the God parts that underpin the whole thing, and that's how the world goes about breaking us. We feel pain, and we build walls, find armor, and go to great lengths to protect ourselves from it. Despite our best efforts, though, this brutal, beautiful life on earth finds ways to break our wholehearted selves into pieces. We are left with slivers and shards that we spend the rest of our lives collecting, bringing those pieces to Jesus, asking him to make a new mosaic using what feels like our scraps. Broken is the opposite of whole, and a broken heart is the worst pain we can know. We are born wholehearted, but we don't stay that way long.

So how do we find our way back to wholeheartedness? How do we find our way back to Jesus? I think it involves owning our stories and connecting with each other in honest, vulnerable ways. We've learned something about that from Brené over the last few weeks, but how did people in Biblical times go about it?

Before it was studied and researched, the idea of rising strong, of being wholehearted, of living close to Jesus was something that we learned from

² <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0745720/characters/nm0771493>

our elders, something cultivated throughout our lives. Think about these characters from Scripture.

Joshua learns from Moses.

Elisha learns from Elijah.

Jesus seeks out John the Baptizer as a mentor and friend.

It is the relationship between Jesus and the disciples, between Peter and John Mark, Gamaliel (Saul's mentor before his name change to Paul), and then Paul and Timothy. Pastor and author Leonard Sweet says these types of relationships are indispensable, necessary to our being wholehearted followers of God. He uses the phrase "ministry by osmosis" (*Eleven*, p. 79).

I think of people such as Jim Thomas whose presence and gentle nature just exude something holy. The more you spend time around people like Mr. Jim, the more you feel like their goodness and faith rub off on you.

Leonard Sweet says a woman named Marie is one of his mentors. He knew she was a Godsend in his life when she said: "You are so into books and your own creativity that you need to be introduced to God's creativity" (*Eleven*, p. 78). He recalls the lesson she teaches him about the sycamore trees. A healthy tree is not a single tree, no matter how great it looks. A healthy sycamore tree is a tree with heirs. A community of trees in various stages of development, never planting just one at a time, always odd numbers, and you look for trees in various stages of development.

"Always look for a tree's successors before you judge its health and vitality." Hang on to this thought as you think about what God is saying to us through Paul's letter to Timothy. Paul is an heir of Jesus Christ, and Timothy is an heir of Jesus and of Paul, and for centuries all in the family of faith follow in the line of heirs, each like a sycamore tree in a vast forest. You and I are heirs.

Listen to some of what Paul tells Timothy all throughout his letter. Each idea a call to wholehearted service:

- “Our aim is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience and sincere faith” (1:5).
- “I give you instructions so that you may fight the good fight, having faith and a good conscience (1:19).
- “I desire then that in every place we should pray” (2:9).
- “the mystery of our religion is great: Christ was revealed in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory” (3:16).
- “Train yourself in godliness” (4:7).
- “Let no one despise you because of your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (4:12).
- “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching” (4:16).
- “Honor widows” (5:3).
- “There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment” (6:6a).

This notion of fighting the good fight of faith is the crux of Paul’s message, and it is the crux of wholehearted living for us. Paul invites us to rest right now in the eternal peace of God, to trust in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus who gives us the gift of faith, to live generously, taking hold of the life that really is life.

What is keeping you from wholehearted living right now in your life? If you feel guilty about your past, I remind us that our relationship with Jesus helps us let go of guilt. If you feel like you want and need to be more, but you’re not sure what to do, relax. God is in control. Pay close attention to yourself. Have you fully grabbed hold of God’s care for you, fully embraced God’s love? How can we share something with others we have not fully grabbed hold of?

Brene Brown says, “My story matters because I matter.” In my story, I have two very special people, Tom Engle and Mark DeVries, who serve as Paul’s for me. I’ve learned a lot from them by osmosis and give thanks for

their humor, for not taking things too seriously, and for helping me become a better version of myself.

Over sabbatical, our family got to see the Rogers family at Montreat, whose kids were in my youth ministry years ago. I did all their weddings, and there are now 8 grandchildren running around. In a sense, they are all Timothys to me, all carrying on some small gift of wholeheartedness the good Lord helped me to give to them.

Leonard Sweet makes a strong case that evolution leads to revolution in the church. The more we evolve as servant leaders and mentors, the more we grow in the image of Jesus Christ and the more our communities of faith flourish. He says the key skill for us to work on is learning to hear, to listen. “Leadership is more of a sound check than a vision test.” He says. Jesus says, “Everyone who belongs to the truth hears my voice.” He does not say, “Everyone who belongs to the truth sees my vision.”

“Some things can only be heard with those who have ears to hear. The more our layers of interference—iPods, Cell phones, multi media—the more our inner voice is blocked, and the more we need help to hear. Timothys learn how to hear themselves think and to eavesdrop on eternity with newly attuned ears. Most important, Timothys learn to recognize Jesus as God’s middle C, God’s tuning fork to the eternal, God’s perfect pitch” (*Eleven*, p. 84).

I remember the scene in the old movie *The Grinch Whole Stole Christmas*, when the Grinch is high above all the Whos in Whoville on Christmas day. He’s stolen all of their Christmas items, even the food and decorations. Still, they circle up outside to sing with joy over the coming of the Christ-child. It is right there in listening to their joy, joy that is neither defined nor marked by presents and gifts, that the Grinch’s heart grows. Listening does indeed grow our hearts towards wholeness.

Wholehearted is cross-carrying, Jesus-following, difficult and rewarding work. We will get our hearts broken, and we will bring them to Jesus, and Jesus will make a new thing of them. We will rise strong.

I'll close with Brené's *Manifesto of the Brave and Brokenhearted*:

"There is no greater threat to the critics and cynics and fearmongers than those of us who are willing to fall because we have learned how to rise.

With skinned knees and bruised hearts; we choose owning our stories of struggle, over hiding, over hustling, over pretending.

When we deny our stories, they define us. When we run from struggle, we are never free. So we turn toward truth and look it in the eye. We will not be characters in our stories. Not villains, not victims, not even heroes.

We are the authors of our lives. We write our own daring endings.

We craft love from heartbreak, compassion from shame, grace from disappointment, courage from failure. Showing up is our power. Story is our way home. Truth is our song. We are the brave and brokenhearted. We are rising strong. (*Rising Strong*, p. 267)

To God be the glory. Amen.

Notes:

Brene Brown has a list of 10 guideposts for living wholeheartedly (from *Daring Greatly*):

- (1) Cultivating Authenticity: Letting go of what people think
- (2) Cultivating Self-Compassion: Letting go of perfectionism
- (3) Cultivating a Resilient Spirit: Letting go of numbing and powerlessness.
- (4) Cultivating Gratitude and Joy: Letting go of scarcity and fear of the dark.
- (5) Cultivating Intuition and Trusting Faith: Letting go of need for certainty.
- (6) Cultivating Creativity: Letting go of comparison.

- (7) Cultivating Play and Rest: Letting go of exhaustion as a status symbol and productivity as self-worth.
- (8) Cultivating Calm and Stillness: Letting go of anxiety as a lifestyle.
- (9) Cultivating Meaningful Work: Letting go of self-doubt and supposed to.
- (10) Cultivating Laughter, Song, and Dance: Letting go of cool and always being in control.