

Rest assured: Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; Luke 6:17-26

Sunday's Coming Premium

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In Wendell Berry's novel *Jayber Crow*, the main character works to come to terms with who he is. At midlife, after going through a crisis, he says, "Now, finally, I really had lost all desire for change, every last twinge of the notion that I ought to get somewhere or make something of myself. I was what I was. 'I will stand like a tree,' I thought, 'and be in myself as I am.'"

In one of his poems Berry speaks of "the blessed conviviality" of creation, "For all His creatures were His pleasures / And their whole pleasure was to be / What He made them; they sought no gain / Or growth beyond their proper measures, / Nor longed for change or novelty. / The only new thing could be pain."

Both passages echo the themes of our texts from Jeremiah 17 and Psalm 1: receiving the blessing and grace of God that comes from trusting God is analogous to being a tree planted by streams of water. The tree is not anxious about what it is or where its water will come from. There is a sense of peace and contentment, of trust and delight. The tree, the person or the congregation knows who it is, longs for no "growth beyond their proper measures" and calls itself blessed.

I'm a member of two different monthly clergy meetings. The first group, made up mostly of clergy who average four or five years in their pastorates, is so task-driven that when it does not have a pressing task, attendance falls precipitously. Conversation is terse, especially between the clergy of the rival leading churches in town. During the meeting it is not uncommon to see ministers impatiently tapping their feet, checking their watches and as soon as the second hand hits the one-hour mark, rushing off to their next appointment. The most common greeting is: "How are you?" And the answer: "Busy."

The second group consists mostly of clergy who average 10 to 15 years serving their particular churches; some have served over 20. The meeting is clearly friendship-driven; after concluding the agenda, everyone moves to a long table piled high with barbeque and all of the trimmings for a good meal and lively conversation. Then the

tables are cleared and out come the dominoes for games of “42.” When you ask, “How are you?” you’ll hear “Blessed” or “God is good.”

I don’t want to press the comparison too far, and clearly there are exceptions; I know from my own 17 years of attendance, however, that the second group is composed of clergy who, although they work hard, also know when and how to rest and trust God. They have come to terms with their proper limits, while the members of the first gathering of clergy continue to operate with the assumption that the only limits are the number of hours in a day and how much they can achieve, often with one eye on the next church up the ladder. The first gathering makes me tired and anxious; the second is enjoyable and renewing. It makes me wonder what kinds of congregations the two types of clergy are building.

This is not a rationalization for laziness or complacency. Nor is it resignation; we’ve all known pastors who have given up and coast into retirement. No, this is a question of how we pastors live our lives: do we trust and delight in God like a tree planted by streams of water or do we trust in our own efforts? Can we be at peace where we are or are we always looking ahead to the next place? This is also not to say that our congregations are not called to grow and share the gospel with the surrounding world, but there is a difference between growing and sharing out of Christlike grace and peace and growing out of frantic compulsiveness. Jeremiah 17, Psalm 1 and Jesus in Luke 6 all agree that there are two ways: blessing or woe, well-watered trust or shriveled fear. Perhaps the Amish are right—start early, work hard and then rest and take delight, knowing that it is all in God’s hands. Or we can follow the way of Wal-Mart and the Pentagon—always work, worry, compete and never trust anyone.

In a scene in Dante’s *Paradiso*, Dante encounters the soul of one who had been a nun on earth and now dwells in one of the lower reaches of heaven. He asks her, “Though you are happy here, do you desire a higher place in order to see more and to be still more close to Him?” She smiles in response and says, “Brother, the power of love appeases our will so we only long for what we have. . . . The essence of this blessed life consists in keeping to the boundaries of God’s will. . . . In His will is our peace” (Canto III, 64-85).

About once a year I see a friend who asks me the same question: “What’s your dream church?” Usually the two of us get together over a meal and share war stories and church gossip—what churches are looking for a pastor and who might be going where. Eventually, the dream church question comes up—where would we go

if we could go anywhere? About seven or eight years ago when he asked me the question, it hit me; I'm *at* my dream church. It was not that my congregation had become some sort of perfect church or that I had lowered my expectations, but I realized that day that I truly enjoyed being where I was and no longer fantasized about another place. As Wendell Berry puts it, "What I wanted had become the same as what I had."