

Petrifying or Vivifying?
John 17:6-19 and Psalm 1
16 May 2021

In a movie some of you may have seen long ago – The Sound of Music – a young Julie Andrews sings a simple little song that expresses what, in fact, is pretty deep wisdom. It suggests that if you have something to **learn...** like how to sing... the place to **begin...** is at the beginning.

And, perhaps there is something the Holy Spirit knows **we** need to learn... or to re-learn... this morning. Why **else**, I've asked myself, have we been **led by** the Spirit to reflect this morning on the very **first** Psalm... the one with which the Psalter begins? Listen now as I read Psalm 1 – this morning reading from the good old Revised Standard Version because of its particular rendering of the **Hebrew** text.

*Blessed is the man who **walks** not in the counsel of the wicked,
(just think the **person...**) who **walks not** in the counsel of the wicked,
nor **stands** in the way of sinners,
nor **sits** in the seat of scoffers;
but **his** delight is in the **law** of the Lord,
and **on** his law he meditates day and night.
He is **like a tree** planted by streams of water,
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.*

*The wicked are **not** so,
but are like chaff which the wind drives away.
Therefore, the wicked will **not stand** in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the Lord **knows** the way of the **righteous**,
but the **way** of the wicked will **perish**.*

This wisdom poem at the beginning of the book of Psalms really **isn't** all that **complex**, is it? It presents for our **consideration** two pictures... portraits of two different persons... or, maybe more accurately, **depictions** of two **contrasting ways of living** in this world... and the consequences of choosing each of those options. I sense the psalmist displays those pictures... hangs them up before us hoping that we will **compare** them... not **only** with each **other** but with ourselves. Maybe the psalmist also hangs a mirror alongside of them! And in doing this, the psalmist surely would want us to allow **one** of the individuals he pictures to be the one we try to **emulate**. **One** of them... and **not** the other.

For a little while, now, I want to look at each of them with you. And I think the one I'll **start** with... is the other one!

First, there's a **picture** of a person who keeps **company** with the **wicked**... and who, **by** that behavior, **becomes** in some sense wicked himself... or herself. *Wicked* is an **interesting** word... one related to an ancient Indo-European word meaning *to bend, to change, or to weaken*. It suggests a person who is vulnerable to **dissolution**... who is progressing (or actually regressing) through a breakdown of his or her vital substance. **Being** bent, or **weakened**, the wicked one gradually **loses** the God-given capacity to act, to choose, to be productive. And, after a time, a kind of **petrification** starts to **set in**. The psalmist pictures this movement into petrification by steps: First a person **walks** in the counsel of the wicked... Then, he or she **stands** in the way of sinners... Then **sits** in the seat of scoffers... Becoming, at each stage of the journey, more and more entrenched, less and less flexible. And the **next** stage is so **unpleasant**, the psalmist doesn't even picture it – he leaves us to imagine **that** stage for ourselves. But in the end, we hear, **all that's left is dust**. **All that's left** of the wicked one's life, dreams, accomplishments and legacy... is chaff... dust blown **away** by the wind. It is so scattered into **oblivion** that even God, who knows all things, knows it no more. It perishes. It's gone. The wicked one's gone.

Now, is that an attractive picture... a picture of something that's attractive to you? Is that **image** of human existence a positive pattern for you? Are the **consequences** of making **choices** like those **enticing** to you? Is there any **similarity between** that portrait and **yourself**? Would you like to see a different option... an **alternative** option? Would you prefer to **choose** a **different** way of being in the world? You **could** choose the **other** picture, then – that of the **righteous** person.

Now, quickly, let me dispel a **notion** you might have **about** righteousness. Righteous does not mean **perfect**. A righteous person is not, necessarily, a person without faults... without blemish... with no mistakes on his or her record. No, a **righteous person** is one who is in a right **relationship** with God... who has a vital, open relationship with God... whose heart is in that relationship deeply. Perhaps we would say that righteousness is more a matter of **where** someone's heart is than anything else. And we **see** in the psalmist's **other** portrait someone **whose heart is** turned toward God... toward God's ways and desires. We see someone who is **devoted** to God... particularly to the **law** of God and, by **extension**, to the One who has **given** that law. This person **delights** in the law God has given – meditates on it, thinks about it night and day... the way someone in love would think of his or her beloved. This person **delights** in God's **law**, which **rises** from God's **love**. And he or she's definitely deeply nourished by it. The Lord's love and light and energy – crystalized **into** that law – come **flowing** into this person the way water and nutrients flow up from the ground into a tree that has been planted by a stream. In the way that such a tree is nourished and **strengthened**, so is the **person** empowered who delights in God's law. As the tree is kept **supple**, so is the **person** kept from petrifying. And as the **tree** is enabled to bring **forth** its fruit and provide good and needed things for others, so does the person who is **in this** kind of vital relationship with the Lord. In **all** that he does, he **prosper**s, we're told. And we can believe that it is not just his **own** life and well-being that he's prospering... but, more importantly, the lives of others... all the others who receive the benefit of his fruitfulness.

So, that's the **second** portrait the Psalmist has put up for us to consider... an image of an alternative way of living. How do **you** look in comparison to **it**? Is there anything about that image that you'd like to **emulate**? Anything about it you wish you could **attain**? Or, is it basically who you already are?

What is it that makes us **who** we are? Ah, now, that is one rich question!

Part of what makes **any one of us** the person he or she is is what's **given** to us – the things we're born with and things that happen: Our mortal nature... our genetic code... our family... the place in which we come to life... the communities in which we're shaped... and all the various circumstances of our life... as it unwinds.

Another part of our identity rises from the **choices** we make... consciously and unconsciously... and the consequences of our choices. I chose to marry a woman who appreciates the **social** graces. And, as a consequence, I have had to become someone who writes thank-you notes – actual notes, on paper, with a pen.

Now, in general, as we **grow up**, our **capacity** for choosing **also** grows. A big part of what it means to **mature** is that we assume **responsibility** for the choices that we make... as well as for their consequences. Growing up – going to school, taking part in church life, and learning from life in general – all of it ought to **lead** a person to make **better** choices, more **informed** choices... and to accept **responsibility** for who he or she's becoming. The **psalmist** would say that we have **some choice** about whether we are **petrifying** – tracking toward a declining moral, spiritual and physical life – or **vivifying** – moving along on a **way of life** that produces good things. We have some choice **and** some responsibility. God, our schools, our church, our family and friends – these **givens** play a **role** in forming us. But **we** also shape **much** of who we are, ourselves. And we do that day by day... hour by hour... minute by minute.

Friends, this day, this hour, you and I have been able to consider a couple of **pictures** – two **different ways** of living and being in this world... and the consequences of following each of these ways. How do you look in **comparison**? Is **one** of these pictures **more** the way you'd **like** to see **yourself**? Do you want to be **petrifying**... decaying... and someday becoming nothing more than dust in the wind? Or, would you **prefer** to be **vivifying**... yielding your fruit in season, and having your way known fully by the Lord.

The Psalmist suggests that we can **become** like a tree planted by streams of water if we **choose** to **sink** our roots into the ground of God's goodness... into the soil of salvation, the aquifer of God's grace!... if we choose to delight in the Lord... in God's **law** and love... if we turn our hearts **toward** God, put our hearts in God's hands, and let God's gracious energies flow **through** us into fruitfulness. Then we will be blessed, indeed. And so will those among whom we live. They also will be blessed... **through** us.

Friends, we have some options. Make good choices. Make the **right** choices. Help one **another** make the right choices. Starting now. We can **start** now.

The choices we've made before now... and the choices that were made for us... they are part of our **past**. But in Christ, with Christ, something new begins for us... right here and right now. Begin laying foundations for a righteous life with God, right here and now. With God. Eventually, that life will become the life that never ends.