

## March 7, 2021 Meditation 1: "The Essence of Goodness"

### Scripture Lesson 1: Psalm 19

<sup>1</sup>The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.

<sup>2</sup>Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge.

<sup>3</sup>There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard;

<sup>4</sup>yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,

<sup>5</sup>which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy.

<sup>6</sup>Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

<sup>7</sup>The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;

<sup>8</sup>the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;

<sup>9</sup>the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

<sup>10</sup>More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

<sup>11</sup>Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

<sup>12</sup>But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.

<sup>13</sup>Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

<sup>14</sup>Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

This upcoming week, our conference's Board of Ordained Ministry is convening, of which I am a part. The Board of Ordained Ministry is the entity in our conference which is responsible for the invitation, nurture, growth, certification, commissioning, and ordination of pastors of churches and ministries in our denomination. The Board consists of 35 pastors and lay persons charged with this process; we meet twice a year, most recently online, but in the pre-COVID past we would meet for several days together, establishing rules for the ordination process, looking at and sometimes creating pastor support programs, checking in with the hierarchy of the conference - that is, Bishop Oliveto and the appointive cabinet -- dealing with protocols and processes and personnel - but our main work, in my opinion, centers on advocating for potential pastors for ministry. In other words, our main work, our most time consuming work, our most difficult work, our most exciting work, centers around interviewing candidates for ministry.

Ah, now who doesn't love a good interview? Me, for one! Perhaps you as well. For an interview is something that invites vulnerability and scrutiny; it is a thing of raw nerves and anxious breathing and borderline paranoia in terms of representing yourself well. We humans are creatures of appearance, whether we like it or not; what we look like, what we say, what we mean, how we think, and how we act are all things that are so very hard to boil down to clear expression in a one-hour interview. Our board takes on average about three hours per candidate

for each interview; and when you consider that we interview each candidate when they first begin, when they apply to be certified, when they apply to be commissioned, and when they apply to be ordained, well, there's twelve hours, plus interviews with Staff Parish Relations Committees, interviews with psychological assessment professionals, meetings with mentors and senior pastors and district superintendents.....well, to the candidates, it probably feels like a thousand hours of interviews when all is said and done. But that is how important this work is; pastoral ministry is a representational profession for God. I know I am a pastor, so I acknowledge my bias when I say, there is no more important work on earth.

As grueling as the process towards ordination may be, there is one aspect of this work that stands out to me as paradoxically essential. In most conversations and interactions between persons, the desire is to talk about pleasantries, to keep things on a positive level, to be heard, to reflect back affection, to find common ground, and to generally experience substance relationally. In the conversations involved in pastoral candidate interviews, all of these hold true, but are of secondary importance to the scrutinization, discernment, and exploration of the negative. In other words, a good candidate interview must focus upon deficiencies.

I've interviewed probably fifty or sixty candidates for ministry in my tenure. And it is always the most difficult thing to bring up, where a candidate is missing the mark, or has a questionable theology, or can't preach a sermon effectively, or is not willing or able to perform pastoral duties effectively. Paperwork is sometimes illegible; positions on issues are sometimes questionable; many exhibit what I call "shoot in the foot" syndrome where they effectively undermine their own leadership by saying certain things in certain ways, knowing what they want to say perhaps but having no idea how it actually comes across to the average congregant. I cannot think of an interview with a candidate where this kind of thing didn't come up - and sharing it with the candidate is one of my least favorite parts of any interview.

But I have come to appreciate that it is the sharing of this difficult part of the interview process which is the most important. For unless a pastor, or for that matter any person, hears what might not be working well, they can do nothing to address that deficiency. And far too many good pastors have failed because where they might be lacking in effectiveness or discernment was never brought to their attention.

Bill Gates was once asked what was the most important information he needed to be successful; he responded "the bad news." He went on to say that people need to learn to "Embrace bad news to learn where you need the most improvement." Only then can one target effective efforts at improvement; only then can one exceed self-limitation and self-delusion.

Our Psalm puts it this way: <sup>8</sup>the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; <sup>9</sup>the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. <sup>11</sup>Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. <sup>12</sup>But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. <sup>13</sup>Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression."

"Who can detect their errors? CLEAR ME FROM HIDDEN FAULTS;" Help me to see what I might miss that could keep my life in limitation, that could misalign me from what is good, holy, just, and true; show me the error of my ways, that I may correct them with your help."

What applies to pastoral candidate interviews and the philosophy guiding Microsoft corporation and the Psalmist's heartfelt plea is what applies equally well to those who wish to practice a faithful life of integrity. WE NEED TO KNOW THE BAD NEWS ABOUT OURSELVES. We need self-scrutiny and honesty, we need to know where we fall short, we need to recognize our insufficiencies and where we need to improve - but never as a condemnation, never as a statement against our worth, never as a plunge into despair. We are to do these things as a release from the grip those things may have on us. We need not be defined by these broken parts of ourselves; we are offered something much better in return of their release. For it is in facing the bad news about ourselves that we are able to receive the good news God provides - and shape our lives accordingly.

## Meditation 2: "The Good Kind of Foolishness"

### Scripture Lesson 2: I Corinthians 1:18-25

<sup>18</sup>For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. <sup>19</sup>For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." <sup>20</sup>Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup>For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup>For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, <sup>23</sup>but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling

block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup>but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup>For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

I came across some really good news recently, and I am delighted to share it with you. I was reading the news when a particular article caught my attention - here is the article:

The World Health Organization (WHO), as a result of recently conducted research, has defined a new criterion that divides human age as follows:

- 0-17 years old: are considered underage
- 18-65 years old: are considered youth/young people
- 66-79 years old: are considered middle-aged
- 80-99 years old: are considered elderly/senior
- 100+ years old: are considered long-lived elderly
- Over 900 years are considered Adam or Seth or Noah from the Old Testament

Now, isn't that great news? According to this new study, I'M STILL A YOUNG PERSON! AND I'VE GOT TEN YEARS (OK, NINE) UNTIL I AM ELDERLY OR CONSIDERED A SENIOR. I am still young; up to age 65 - just don't tell my arthritic toe, or my lack of endurance, or my aches and pains, or my gray hairs; and most upsetting - I'm not sure, but this new designation may revoke my fairly new subscription to AARP!

I know, I know, "pastor John, you're being kind of foolish." I hear what you are saying.....the fact that an accredited organization out there makes a determination that a certain age means a certain status in society doesn't make it so; age is a biological, quantitative condition of life, varying from person to person; calling someone young who doesn't really feel young is an act of futility; it's foolishness.

Or is it? For doesn't the same logic work out quite well in reverse? Calling someone old who is young might have the same effect as calling someone young who is old. Or, more to the point, thinking of oneself as young helps shape the reality, just as thinking of oneself as old helps shape that reality. In other words, isn't what we think impactful of in our lives? Is not our chosen attitude, sometimes a choice against what might appear to be obvious, a game changer in terms of our life's outlook and purpose?

Do we not know some young people who seem old? I know I do.

And do we not know some older folks who are incredibly young in mind and spirit? I know several.

AND ISN'T THEIR ATTITUDE OFTEN A SHAPER OF THAT REALITY?

To think different from what we are assumed to be - is this foolishness? Or wisdom?

In this passage from I Corinthians, we hear a well-known proclamation that has us thinking twice about God's nature and the understanding of life's value - Paul says

"<sup>20</sup>Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup>For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe<sup>25</sup>For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

I'll confess, this is one of my favorite scriptures in the entire Bible, because it provides one of the greatest expressions of God's reversals. God turns things around, God does the unexpected, God overturns expectations and assumptions in order to keep us open to God. It is in God's unpredictable nature that we can be sure we are not worshiping ourselves, or a God of our own creation; it is the essential nature of the divine to be beyond our complete comprehension, inducing a humility that keeps God sovereign over our lives. And I am comforted that as humility in this world often feels like foolishness, I may never be closer to God than when I am feeling foolish.