

**A Radiant, Righteous Life**  
**Psalm 1**  
*(preached on May 12, 2024)*

We are now in the beautiful month of May. The month of May brings many enjoyable times. To me, graduations are among those enjoyable times in May. At graduations, on campuses all over the country, students and faculty walk in stately processions, wearing robes and mortarboards dating from the Middle Ages. Sometimes the mortarboards the students wear are decorated with twenty-first century touches. Sometimes a student does a goofy dance of celebration as he receives his diploma. For the most part, though, graduation ceremonies are serious occasions. Graduations are often called commencement exercises, to acknowledge the fact that a graduation is actually a beginning. Students and parents and grandparents listen to commencement speeches, where speakers describe the opportunities that await the graduates, and the challenges they will face.

Graduations are also occasions for giving gifts. I was surprised to learn recently that one of the most popular gifts to give a new graduate is a children's book. The book is written by Dr. Seuss. It's entitled *Oh the Places You'll Go!* The book begins this way:

“Congratulations! Today is your day.  
 You're off to Great Places! You're off and away!”  
 “You have brains in your head  
 And feet in your shoes.  
 You can steer yourself  
 Any direction you choose.”  
 The book goes on to describe the different kinds of people and places that you're bound to discover as you travel. It concludes with great exuberance:  
 “And will you succeed?  
 Yes! You will, indeed!  
 98 and  $\frac{3}{4}$  percent guaranteed.  
 Kid, you'll move mountains! ...  
 Today is your day.  
 Your mountain is waiting.  
 So...get on your way!”

I did not receive this book as a graduation gift. I enjoyed reading it years after I had graduated. At that time I was going through a difficult time in my life. The upbeat, positive message of the book lifted my spirits and gave me hope. But when I took a closer look, the book *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* raised some questions for me. When I read it more carefully, I realized that the book describes a journey to success, made by someone alone, all on their own. The book describes, with great enthusiasm, what you might call an solo journey.

The book suggests that life is mostly about individual success. It suggests that life is a matter of mastering certain skills and going on adventures and succeeding, by

yourself. The book suggests that, when all is said and done, you are a self-sufficient individual. You rely on an inner core of will power. Yes you will go places. You will succeed, but you will go solo, propelled only by your own determination and your own positive attitude.

That's the definition of success that the book celebrates. It's a view of success that's widely held in our world. Many people today feel that determination and a positive attitude are all we need to succeed, that it's good to be self-sufficient. But the idea that each of us is a self-sufficient individual is deeply at odds with the message we find in our passage for today from the Hebrew Scriptures.

The very first psalm in the Bible's book of Psalms, Psalm 1, celebrates the truly happy person. The happy person is not a self-sufficient individual. The life of the happy person is not guided by determination and a positive attitude. The life of the happy person is grounded in God. The truly happy person knows how much he needs God. Hear the opening verses of the psalm again:

“The truly happy person doesn't follow wicked advice, doesn't stand on the road of sinners, and doesn't sit with the disrespectful. Instead of doing those things, these persons love the Lord's Instruction, and they [meditate on] God's Instruction day and night!”

As we reflect on this psalm today, it will help our understanding if we first take a closer look at a couple of words used here. The meaning of these words has changed a little in the thousands of years since the psalm was written. First, let's take a closer look at the word *wicked*. We hardly ever use the word wicked in a serious way any more. In some places, to call something “wicked good” is actually a compliment! But the Bible takes wickedness seriously. In the Bible, a wicked person is someone who puts herself, not God, at the center of her life. A wicked person makes it a priority to satisfy all her own desires. Her desires come first and God is a distant second, if God is in the picture at all.

Now let's spend a minute with the word *righteous*. Often today the word *righteous* implies a conviction that you're better than other people. When we call someone righteous, we're suggesting that they're smug and self satisfied, that they're close to perfect. But in the Bible, being righteous doesn't mean being perfect. Being righteous simply means you put God, and God's loving purposes, at the center of your life. In the Bible, a righteous person doesn't always get it right. A righteous person gets off track and stumbles sometimes. But a righteous person does his best to live by the loving ways of God. As Pastor Christine Holden puts it, a righteous person lets the loving ways of God shape his life. \*

Of course in life things are not that simple. None of us is completely righteous. None of us is wicked through and through. But these two opposites, these two poles, can give us a kind of framework to ponder the question at the heart of the psalm. The

question is, how are we going to live our lives? Are we going to center our lives on God, or on ourselves?

When I was reflecting on this psalm last week, preparing for this sermon, I consulted an article by the *New York Times* columnist David Brooks. Brooks doesn't talk about God and the Bible in his article, but it seems to me that the sort of person he describes in his article is what the Bible would call a righteous person. In the article, Brooks writes about people he's known who "radiate an inner light." When he meets such a person, Brooks writes, it brightens his whole day. He says that achieving that kind of inner radiance does not happen automatically.

He says, "wonderful people are made, not born." The wonderful person, the person who radiates an inner light, the person the Bible would call righteous, becomes that radiant, righteous person by fulfilling what Brooks calls "specific moral accomplishments." Today I'll be talking about two of them.

First, he calls one of those accomplishments "the humility shift." The righteous person is humble; he doesn't pretend to be perfect. The righteous person is forthright about his own weaknesses. He's painfully aware that he can be self-centered, or hardhearted, or desperate for approval. At the same time, he's not consumed by the knowledge of his weaknesses, because that can actually be a form of self-centeredness. I'd say he's simply, deeply aware of how much he needs God.

Brooks says that acknowledging our weakness can shape our character. He uses the example of Dwight Eisenhower. He writes, "Dwight Eisenhower realized early on that his core sin was his temper. He developed a moderate, cheerful exterior because he knew he needed to project optimism and confidence to lead. He did silly things to tame his anger. He took the names of the people he hated, wrote them down on slips of paper, and tore them up and threw them in the garbage. [Over his lifetime, this way of handling anger helped Eisenhower develop a mature temperament.] He made himself strong in his weakest places." You become a radiant, righteous person when you confront your weaknesses and nurture your inner strengths.

Second, Brooks writes about another moral accomplishment: something he calls the dependency leap. You also become a radiant, righteous person when you realize how much you depend on God and on other people. It's no accident that Psalm 1 says the righteous person is like a tree "planted by streams of water." The radiant, righteous person has deep roots: roots embedded in the love of God. She knows she needs constant connection to the love of God and the love she shares with other people. She lives by her commitment to God and others. That commitment will hold her up when challenges come along. She doesn't rely on some inner core of will power. She relies on her commitment to God and others.

Brooks finds this commitment to God and others in the life of the social activist Dorothy Day. Dorothy Day didn't always have that commitment to God and others. He writes that when she was young, "Dorothy Day led a disorganized life. That life included

drinking [and] carousing. [She experienced depression and attempted suicide a couple of times. She was just] following her desires, unable to find direction.” But Dorothy Day’s life changed when her daughter was born. When her daughter was born, Day realized she had a great capacity for love. It was a love that pulled her outside herself.

Brooks writes, “That kind of love reminds you that your true riches are in another... It puts you in a state of need and makes it delightful to serve what you love. Dorothy Day’s love for her daughter spilled outward and upward... She made unshakable commitments in all directions. She became a Catholic, started a radical newspaper, opened settlement houses for the poor, and lived among the poor. [She embraced] poverty as a way to build community, to not only do good, but be good” (Brooks, “The Moral Bucket List,” *New York Times*, 4/11/15).

As the life of Dorothy Day shows us, the radiant, righteous person is not self sufficient. The radiant, righteous person has deep roots: roots embedded in the love of God. The love of God pulls them outside themselves to serve others.

Today may not be a graduation day for you. You may not be commencing any new endeavors as you walk out of church today. But today and every day, you and I make decisions. We make decisions we’re aware of, and we make decisions we don’t even notice. Little by little, we decide how we’re going to live our lives. Are we going to center our lives on ourselves? Are we going to strive for success as individuals on our own terms? Are our lives going to begin and end with our own desires? Or are we going to open ourselves to the love that pulls us out of ourselves, to serve others? Are we going to let that love spill outward and upward? Are we going to do our best to be radiant, righteous women and men? Psalm 1 assures us that our lives are truly happy only when we’re grounded in the loving purposes of God.

Rev. Elva Merry  
Easter 7

\*Holden, *Upper Room Disciplines* 2024, p. 158