



Simply to Flourish

Not Starting Over | 7:13-27
October 22, 2023
[Worship Music Spotify Playlist](#)

Prelude – Psalm 92 by Poor Bishop Hooper

Welcome/Announcements

- Planning Team
- October 29th Silent Retreat & Picnic

CALL TO WORSHIP | Psalm 92:1-4, 12-13

It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name,
O Most High: to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night,
to...music...to...melody...
For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy...
The righteous flourish like the palm tree and grow like a cedar...They are planted in the house of the LORD; they flourish in the courts of our God...

Song #1 – Father You Are All We Need, by Citizens

Song #2 - Steadfast by Sandra McCracken

Dismiss Kids

PRE-SERMON READING | Matthew 7:13-16, 18, 21, 24-27

Enter by the straight, closely-defined gate. For wide is the gate and broad the way leading to destruction, and many are those entering through it. For small is the gate and compressed the way leading to life, and few are those finding it.

Before of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but within are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits...A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit.

Not everyone saying to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one constructing the will of the Father of me...

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on the house, but it did not fall, because it was founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man...And when the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell...

SERMON |

Everyone who **hears...and does...** builds on a rock. And when the rain falls...it does not fall...Everyone who **hears...and does not do...** builds on sand. And when the rain falls...it falls.

There is a paradox to our faith. In some ways, our life starts over in Jesus. We are “born again,” “born of the Spirit,” as Jesus depicts our entry into life with God full and forever in John’s gospel. And while, as is the case for all growing and maturing life, there will be discoveries along the journey that feel utterly and historically new, we’ve developed this bad habit as humans, especially as religious and Western humans, of perpetually starting over. Individually and collectively, our lives are marked with fits and starts. This, too, is a source of our anxiousness and restlessness—starting over or wondering if we should.

Have you noticed that tendency? Whether because of hiccups or mistakes or significant events, whether externally forced, or existentially fueled, or exponentially driven, whether a longing or a fact, “new seasons” feel like we are, whether entirely or in part, rebuilding for the life we want, that good and purposeful existence that we are committed to. In that way, we’re not unlike the forbears of the people Jesus is speaking to, whose history from Exodus to Exile and back again was a repetitive cycle of repentance and rebellion, remembering and forgetting, holiness and muddied living, and zealotry and apathy amid the navigation of life’s troubles. Is it any wonder then why the sung prayers of forever flourishing in daily living felt wishful at best, naïve more often, and at times, like bitter irony?

But remember what Jesus did to start our series and his sermon? He reoriented us to a pursuit of life that is less of a journey to someplace other, and more of a discovery and deepening of where we already are. A flourishing life is not in starting over or in some place, person, or thing new, but in uncovering the not-so-new yet different navigational bearings that allow us to interact differently in the daily collision of souls amid our to-do lists.

We’ve attempted over this series to lay out how we might continue to go deeper into the reality in which we exist and construct an abundant, flourishing life for us and others amid the ebbs and flows of the emotions of our environment. And so, here at the end, we find one last charge from Jesus to keep at it, encouragement **not to start over** whenever life’s troubles, in whatever form they are “faced,” inevitably find us but continue to flourish in the blessed place we already are.

Jesus says, *hear and do* the words he’s been speaking. Construct a life steadied on his revealed reality, and you won’t have to start over. Hear but don’t do, and you’ll find yourself rebuilding after every seasonal storm. While there is no doubt about the “command,” there is a broad interpretive history to what it means for everyday life. So, based on our conversations these last couple of months, what does it mean to hear and do the words of Jesus so that we don’t start over?

HOW WE DON'T START OVER

- *Be Aware to Be Present*
- Don’t Just Listen, Look
- Do the Work of Relating Rightly

Let's start where we enter, verses 13-14.

Enter by the straight, closely-defined gate. For wide is the gate and broad the way leading to destruction, and many are those entering through it. For small is the gate and compressed the way leading to life, and few are those finding it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

We said a lack of self-awareness and self-management of what is going on under the surface perpetuates our reactivity within ourselves and between others, a reactivity that is polluting the soil of those places and people from which life sprouts, matures, and flourishes.

“Awareness [of what's going on under the surface] is critical to be sure, but it is *not* the path of growth; it is simply the gate. We unlock it and walk through it, but on the other side of self-awareness is difficult work that brings deeper freedom for us and those we [share life with].”¹

Being aware of what is going on under the surface is our entrance into life different, but as Cuss said here and expanded on later, the goal of awareness is not merely to dissipate our unsettledness. The goal is not merely a negation but **a reception of presence in the moment**, in the granular, compressed interaction that is real life.

The goal is not simply to be free from anxiety's grip [remember, the physiology of disquietedness plays a necessary role in our living well and long], but freed to be...fully present to God and the people we are called to serve **in that moment**...recognizing that God is already where I am heading.”²

Awareness keeps us present and purposeful. But awareness is just the gate. And where does awareness lead us? Into the work of going deeper to live freer for ourselves and others, into being present. It is a compressed work, a work that presses us into the small places of our hearts and others, into the interactions and conversations within and between in which we get to experience the life of God. Small discoveries, or discovery in small things, is not always where we look. So, in v. 13-14, Jesus encourages us that hearing and doing is first finding the way through awareness but also to stick with it. We don't just find it; we are finding it. The word “finding” connotes finding something that is given, receiving something, something like the psalmist finds when he prays:

“Examine me and know my disquieting thoughts...and lead me in the way ancient and everlasting” (Psalm 139:24).

Our tendency once we've seen the small thing is to zoom back out to the big thing, but that's where we inevitably get lost in “things too great and too marvelous for” us (Psalm 131:1) and thus find ourselves once again anxious and restless, withering rather than flourishing. Whether wars and rumors of wars or the drama of others or the thing in the future or anything out of our immediate control or grasp. When our eyes get too

¹ Steven Cuss, *Managing Leadership Anxiety*, xiv.

² *Ibid.*, 41,44.

far beyond where we are truly (in our finiteness and God's providence), our hearts race, our minds run, our stomachs tighten, and we have the most random conversations with people in the coffee shop as I did on Wednesday!! (Matt & Matt & Eric)

We can enter the day through another way, going through life in a manner that moves us away from the granular to the general or the future or the grandiose that withdraws our attention and awareness from the context in which kingdom life (flourishing life) is truly manifest. There are ways of walking through life that neglect the examine, whether because of distraction or fear, pride or consumption, indifference or ignorance. It is relatively easy to find those ways; they inundate our daily existence. We actually don't have to go looking for them. In fact, **it is the not-looking in general and specific that keeps us starting over!**

HOW WE DON'T START OVER

- Be Aware to Be Present
- *Don't Just Listen, Look*
- Do the Work of Relating Rightly

So, how do we not start over, first and foremost, by maturing in our awareness of what is going on under the surface so that we can be present. But of course, we learn from others and with others. After all, a good and purposeful life is made with and for others. Like good pilgrims, we know our journey into depth and flourishing is not a solo act. It is only in relating that we can experience the life of God—but our communal existence and tendency to follow while having positive attributes also exposes our vulnerability. Here is what Jesus says starting in verse 15,

Beware of **false prophets** who come to you in sheep's clothing but within are ravenous wolves. You will **recognize** them by their fruits...A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. (Matthew 7:15-16, 18)

Prophets speak, usually claiming to speak on behalf of the Lord. A false prophet speaks what sounds true but is not true or speaks what is true but to take advantage of others (keep followers, gain wealth, or build the kingdom in their own vision). Sheep are, by nature, followers. They not only follow the shepherd's leading, what they receive from his words, but also respond to one another, following the flock's movements and bleats. So, Jesus says in v. 15-20, don't just listen and follow along with what is being purported by the herd; look (recognize or discern). When we do, we'll find our anxiousness and restlessness might just be cultivated by what is driving the ones we are journeying with, what they are selling, and our indiscriminate going with the flock. So, once again, look, or as Jesus said earlier,

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. (Matthew 7:7)

What we are asking, seeking, and knocking to get in on is discernment, a skill to recognize and distinguish good from bad, which, says the writer of Hebrews, is a skill for the flourishing honed through constant practice,

But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. (Hebrews 5:14)

Again, we all follow. It is our nature and our necessity. But we can't do so without looking, discerning, or observing. So, get close enough to persons and ideas being espoused and to see if they are actually rooted in something good and healthy (flourishing themselves) or dis-eased as Chaz described it last week. It will take some discernment, but Jesus presumes you're competent for the task, and so should you!

So, to not start over, we:

HOW WE DON'T START OVER

- Be Aware to Be Present
- Don't Just Listen, Look
- *Do the Work of Relating Rightly*

A uniquely religious source of anxiousness and restlessness comes from the expectations of "doing the will" of the Lord or leaders or scriptures, or social constructs. So, what does the "doing" entail? Jesus helps us there, too, in verses 21-23.

Not everyone saying to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one **carrying out** the will of the Father of me. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.' (Matthew 7:21-23)

Every group and generation has particular answers to the question of what we need to do to experience a flourishing life with God. Still, most of them fall into the general categories of a) **Prophecy**, whether preaching, teaching, evangelizing, or something more experiential/individual vocalization of God's word; b) **Casting Out Demons**: whether pushing back the darkness spiritually or socially or something more direct in combating the opposition to God's word or, c) **Many Mighty Works**: whether in buildings, in numbers, in movements, or something more miraculous manifesting the vision of God's word.

All good things. All things Jesus himself had done to this point would do with regularity in the years that followed this sermon, and all things he continues to do still today. But ultimately, those things are not really what "doing" the words of Jesus are all about.

"Doing" is about carrying out a life in the Father's will, which is not something figured out like a puzzle but discovered and deepened as Jesus described in the ordinary and every day relating of our daily existence between these "lifted up things." Much like the psalmist:

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high... (Psalm 131:1a)

Once again, Jesus settles our souls by grounding our actions in the places of depth. Remember that we started the series with the argument that a life whole and holy, deeply free and deeply intertwined and grounded, is a life built on the Ten simple Words we spent the summer digging into. The problem isn't knowing the words (i.e., hearing); it's that an unexamined life lacks the depth of the words. If we are our unaware that our navigational, relational, and soul processes are off, we can't do what we say we believe, even if we want to. That was Israel's history. We, like them, do not carry out "the law" (the words given for freedom and flourishing), and so, we are living lawless. And what are the Ten Words if not the work of righteousness of relating rightly to God, ourselves, our families, and our neighbors? As we mentioned at the beginning,

"Awareness is...simply the gate. We unlock it and walk through it, but on the other side of self-awareness is the difficult work that brings deeper freedom for us and those we [share life with]."

And the kind of work is relational. Which, for the last time, brings us back to the start.

BACK TO THE START

A life not destroyed or misled (and thus in need of a "re-start") by anxiousness and restlessness is a life content. Self-sufficient within Life itself to "face" whatever the day might bring.

What happens when our disquieted hearts don't fail us by determining our reactions but operate as "an early detection system,"³ a warning light meant to help us avoid a collision or catastrophe, an indicator to do something different? Well, if that were the case, we might say, as the apostle Paul did, that we'd learned the secret to facing whatever is or is about to be.

...I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content...I have learned *the secret to facing* plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11-13)

To be content is not an appeal to "just be happy" or even a censure "do not complain," but rather a **state of self-sufficiency** in relationship with Life itself. Contentment is the experience of being sufficient within, possessing the ability/competence to flourish in my life, in every circumstance in which my life is lived, because my life is lived in God's life, bound in His ever being, in His starting and His finishing. Contentment is a calm and quiet soul. A soul that knows it is bound and, at the same time, freed to really live. At least that's what the psalmist contends:

Oh LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. *But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child content in its mother's arms, my soul is content within me.* (Psalm 131:1-2)

If we want to not start over again and again but mature to flourishing, *we learn contentment*, calming and quieting our soul by living aware and present, discerning, and committed to the work that brings deeper freedom in our relationships to God, one another, the earth, and even ourselves. A life already ours because we are found, already home and whole and holy in the life of Jesus given for us that we are finding (receiving).

³ Cuss, 17.

BREATHING EXERCISE |

- Breath In on lines 1 and 3 and Breath Out on lines 2 and 4 (repeat 3xs)

The Kingdom is within my grasp
I don't need to be grabby
Already Blessed is life in Jesus
My life is hidden in Christ

God's Thoughts are too many to add up
I don't need to get lost in the math
Wonderful are The Works of His Hand
My soul knows it well

Abundant Life is in Relationship
I don't need more but different
Life is in Jesus, The Light of Life
My life flourishes in The Light

When the music begins to play, that is your cue for one last breath before making your way to the table, finding the elements of communion. Hold on to them as you return to your seat and remain standing as we sing together.

Song #3 – Your Glory w/ Nothing but the Blood by All Sons and Daughters

COMMUNION with CORPORATE CONFESSION |

Our Father in heaven, hallowed is your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

We receive from you all we need for life today, knowing there is plenty more for tomorrow.

We're forgiven, and so we forgive. Led not into the conflicts within and quarrels between, but delivered from all that thievers life.

Yours is the only and forever Kingdom and power and glory;

all of which you graciously share with us through Your Son.

In His life, we live. Amen.

Song #4 – I Know You Jesus by Young Oceans

BENEDICTION | Psalm 127:1-2

As we conclude the day made for us, we enter into the work for which we are made [**LIGHT THE CANDLE**], remembering: Unless the LORD builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to this beloved sleep.