

The Gifts of Relationships: Growth

Psalm 1 (NRSVUE)

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Rev. Melissa Hatfield, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-gifts-of-relationships-growth/

I.

One of my pastor friends recently reflectedⁱ on the adventures of a playground favorite: the merry-go-round. He shared a memory from grade school, when he and his friends enjoyed a gentle spin on the merry-go-round.

But then, two eighth-grade boys with arms like orangutans came over to liven things up. They pushed, and the merry-go-round spun faster and faster. Some kids began screaming, terrified of being flung off into the schoolyard. Occasionally, one did — just like my nephew at his preschool graduation party. Blake, who read our scripture today, was flung off the merry-go-round—right on his tush, in a puddle of mud.

My pastor friend Jim first learned about centrifugal force on that merry-go-round in grade school. This force wants to throw you off the ride and grows stronger as the merry-go-round spins faster. Have you ever felt like life is spinning so fast that you're just holding on for dear life, hoping not to be flung into the dirt?

But Jim also discovered a secret: if he moved to the center, just above the axis, the force subsided. He could even let go of the iron bars. He had found the eye of the storm—a place of perfect peace.

Psalm 1 is like the center of the merry-go-round. The Book of Psalms is a roller-coaster ride of emotions—joy and sorrow, hope and fear, faith and doubt. There are songs of praise and songs of lament and weeping. Depending on where you read in these songs of our faith, you might feel like you're on the edge of the merry-go-round.

Psalm 1 invites us to move from the chaotic edges of the ride to the center, using the analogy of a tree.

II.

In May 2023, just before one of the hottest and driest Junes on record, I purchased a State Street Maple tree and had it planted in my backyard. I was excited as I envisioned its branches stretching high one day, offering shade and the gift of brilliant yellow leaves each fall. Two stakes were planted on either side to help this young tree grow tall and strong.

I watered it, tended to it, and checked on it regularly. But despite my efforts, the tree never thrived. The conditions were harsh, and the soil rocky. Then, late in 2024, it simply fell over. Like soldiers guarding a tomb, the stakes still stand while the tree lies between them, its dried-up,

shallow roots exposed. Whenever I look outside, I see my failure—a somewhat expensive, disappointing failure.

The roots never dug deep enough to anchor the tree to withstand the summer heat or the strong winds. They couldn't find the rich soil they needed to thrive. I couldn't see what was going on underground, but I could tell everything was not well based on the story the leaves told above ground. I felt defeated like I had failed at something simple—keeping a tree alive. And isn't that how we often feel in life? Like we're doing everything we're supposed to, we still feel unrooted, disconnected, and weary. Like that tree, many of us look fine on the surface, but what's happening underneath determines if we stand or fall.

Psalm 1 teaches us that the soil we plant ourselves in matters if we want to survive and thrive. When the wind blows, the droughts come, and the heat bears down on us, our strength and peace come from being deeply rooted in God and the relationships that give life.

III.

Psalm 1 begins by telling us that the happy or blessed are those who don't do three things—they don't walk, stand, or sit with the unhappy ones. In other words, the unhappy are not grounded or rooted. They're always in motion. Nothing satisfies them, so they are always searching. Nothing feels secure and safe, so they seek something or someone else, anything or anyone but God, to be their foundation until that, too, caves under their feet, and they go searching once again. The psalmist says the unhappy are like fragile chaff, the dry, scale-like coverings of seeds. Chaff is ungrounded and unrooted, subject to being blown about with the slightest of winds.

The reality is that sometimes, the brokenness of this world and the brokenness within us make us feel unrooted. We are easily scattered by the wind, hanging on with our fingertips, seconds from being flung into the dirt. One more headline in the news, one more event added to the calendar, one more person who lets you down, one more dirty sock on the floor or dirty dish in the sink, one more driver who causes you to shout, "Where did you learn to drive?" one more spin by a bully with orangutan arms and off we fly – flat on our tush in a puddle of something.

Maybe that is how the Spirit finally gets our attention to help us see things aren't so good underground with us. We can't always see what's going on underground, but we, and those around us, can tell all is not well by the story the leaves and the fruit of our lives tell. When I'm more road ragey than usual, I've learned it's because my roots are not planted in good soil. When I'm throwing a pity party, I've learned it is usually because I'm living on the edges of the merry-go-round at unsustainable speeds, afraid I'm going to end up in the dirt.

But those who are happy and blessed are planted and deeply rooted, like a strong and unmovable tree, by streams of water that nourish it. These people are planted and rooted deeply in God. Jeremiah 17:7 reminds us, "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord." The winds can blow, and the sun can bear down, but they will not wither and die. They will grow and will produce the good they are meant to produce. The orangutans of this

world can push as fast as they want, but happy and blessed is the one centered over the axis that is God. They will not be thrown off into a big pile of mud.

Happy are those who delight in the law of the Lord, who meditate upon it day and night, who center themselves upon the law. And what is the law? We find the answer in Mark 12:29-31. When asked which law was first of all, Jesus answered: "The first is this: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'" The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

The law's summary, the key to happiness, the heart of wisdom, what we delight in and meditate on day and night is love: love of God and love of each other. Jesus tells us and shows us repeatedly that the love of God and others is the summation of all the law. The law of God is meant to bring us together and make us joy-filled people! Relationships are the foundation of a rooted, joyful life. We survive and thrive, we grow through life-giving relationships with Christ and each other.

Like the psalmist, the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus with a reference to a tree. Paul prayed for them to be strengthened in their inner being. With the power of the Holy Spirit flowing through them, and with Christ dwelling within them, they are, he said, "being rooted and grounded in love." (Ephesians 3:17). As the psalmist sees a flourishing person as a well-planted tree, Paul sees a healthy and growing church the same way. Paul urges the church to attend to its inner life—the deep, unseen places where God's best work happens. We flourish when we are deeply rooted in love and God's truth. When it is missing, we stop bearing good fruit. We become weak, unstable, and easily uprooted like my fallen tree.

IV.

A friend, who I'll call Jake, went through a painful journey several years ago when his wife developed an addiction to pain medication. It led to other addictions, unfaithfulness to their marriage, and even some jail time for her. Their young daughter was not even a year old when all this began. The mom was unrooted, tossed about, always searching for the next thing like chaff in the wind. My friend tried to help his wife for years while remaining steady for his daughter.

But after nearly a decade, the constant battering took its toll on him. He felt ungrounded by his anger, hurt, resentment, and grief, not just for him but even more so for the toll it was having on their daughter. He knew he had to plant himself somehow again, to move to the center of the merry-go-round before he and his daughter found themselves in the dirt.

At a Christian men's retreat, which he didn't want to attend, he experienced a safe community that was real and vulnerable about their pain and struggles. In the safety of that community, God began to reach through the pain. As Jake planted himself near God, he grew, healed, and bore fruit through the work of the Spirit, such as peace, patience, forgiveness, and healthy boundaries. He and we survive and thrive; we grow through life-giving relationships with Christ and each other.

A life disconnected from God and community is fragile.

That's why we gather. Despite our differences, with our differences, we come together unified around Christ, our center. We sing, we pray, we encourage one another. We are called to be a community that strengthens and sustains one another in love. We root ourselves in God's presence so that when the storms come, we stand firm. We delight in and meditate on the law of love so that the Spirit can bear good fruit through us when the world is not as it should be.

A quote that helped my friend Jake in that season of his life was this: “Christians have their roots in the future, and their branches in the present.” The most secure place to plant our roots is in the truth of who God is – God is good. God is faithful. God is merciful. No matter what happens, God will one day establish a new heaven and a new earth, and all will be restored, all will be redeemed, and all will be reconciled to God, who is Love. If we can remain rooted in this future truth, our lives today will be the branches that bear the leaves and the fruit that God intends for us to produce. Our lives will tell a beautiful story today when we are rooted in the goodness and generosity of God for all creation. Our fruit will be the fruit of the Spirit that nourishes our world – the fruit of love, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Maybe you feel like you're on the edge of the merry-go-round today—white-knuckling your grip, dizzy from the spinning world, exhausted from just trying to hold on. Maybe you've even been flung off a few times. The good news of Psalm 1 is that we don't have to live that way. Root yourself in Christ. Move toward the center and grab hold of God. Step away from the things that keep you ungrounded and plant yourself in Christ's love. Because the closer you stay to Jesus, the less likely chaos can throw you off.

Root yourself in the relationships that bring life. Because when the storms come—and they will—you won't be the one flung into the dirt. You'll stand tall, unshaken, like a tree planted by the water for the glory of God and the good of the world.

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All scripture quoted is from the NRSVUE unless otherwise noted.

ⁱ https://jimsomerville.wordpress.com/2025/02/10/on-the-merry-go-round/?fbclid=IwY2xjawlZ_vBleHRuA2FlbQixMQABHTn2knovbEQtN8YxCTeS_GNcr_LBY-b9kiUTX5WTMjcRRNdoayzuHOv3Sw_aem_ot8VmXo2qiBodRhJAlqDwQ