

The First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
Roland Perdue, Interim Pastor  
Sunday, June 17, 2012

**LIFE IS A FOUNTAIN**  
Psalm 1; Jeremiah 17:4-13

Rabbi Fischer and I were colleagues in Campus Ministry at the University of Georgia. He was rabbi at the Hillel House and I was Presbyterian Campus Pastor. We were drinking tea and telling rabbi/preacher jokes. I cannot forget one of his jokes. It goes:

A student came to say good bye to his campus rabbi after graduation ceremonies. He said, "Rabbi, you have been so influential to me that I wanted to say a special 'Shalom' and ask you to give me a motto, a mantra, by which I can live my life going forward." The rabbi was impressed with the student's trust. After a moment's thought, the rabbi said, "Always remember, my son, 'Life is a fountain.'"

And from then on the young man repeated the saying every time he ran into trouble or joy. "Life is a fountain!"

As the years passed into decades, the former student heard that his campus rabbi was in very poor health and would likely not manage to last through the coming few weeks. So he traveled to Brooklyn where his rabbi had retired to thank him for the words of wisdom the old rabbi had given him. He told the old man how many times he had muttered those precious words, "Life is a fountain!," over the years.

And then he said, "But you know, Rabbi, I never really knew what it meant. 'Life is a fountain!' What, ah, does it mean?" The rabbi thought for a moment. Then he replied, "So! Life is **not** a fountain!"

"Life is a fountain!" "Life is not a fountain!" I think the joke, like most real jokes, is rather profound. You may have to have lived among Jews, enjoyed very dear Jewish friends or be very intelligent, however, to catch the profundity of the joke, however.

**First of all,**

Life comes rushing at us with great indifference. Life really does not care about you or me. At the level of mere existence - birth, breathing, dying, dead - life is neutral. And within certain limitations, life is pretty much what you and I make of it.

There is more than a little wisdom in a Rumi prayer/saying:

This being human is a  
guest house.  
Each morning is a new  
arrival.

A joy, a depression, a  
meanness,  
some momentary  
awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain  
them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of  
sorrows,  
who violently sweep your  
house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest  
honorably.  
He may be clearing you  
out for some new delight.

The dark thought, the  
shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door  
laughing,  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever  
comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

If we are fortunate and can choose, we can to a large extent determine our attitude toward life as we face it and experience it.

We all know that good things happen to bad people, and good things happen to good people. And the same is true of bad things; bad things happen to us all. I learned that from another Jewish Rabbi, and it's no joke. He said it rains on the unjust and the righteous, and the sun shines on the righteous and the unjust. In other words, we all get wet and we all dry off. Life at the level of existence does not much care whether you're all wet or dripped dried. We are all in this thing together.

Comedians and philosophers tell us the same thing: how we view tragedy is a matter of choice, will and imagination; and so is comedy. We choose our attitude toward life. That is, we do, if we have a chance. Some do not have a chance. On December 2, 2010, Marchella Brett-Pierce died at home. She was four years old and weighed 18 pounds. There were clear indications she had been tied to her bed and repeatedly abused during her short life. She weighed a mere single pound and four ounces at birth and was placed in custodial care until deemed ready to be cared for by her mother. When she was four she was slapped by mother or father and died. My spouse wrote in response a poem called *Pound of Flesh*.

Pound of Flesh  
barely slipping into life,  
lifted by latexed hands  
to incubated loneliness,  
feeble pulsing heart,  
gasping lungs  
machine enhanced  
in noisy, sterile space,  
isolated warmth,  
no skin on skin  
nor nestling comfort,  
no suckled breast.

Birth begins her death  
painful and alone,  
cared for by strangers,  
her case clip-boarded  
like a survey  
to be answered.

Drug-binged parents  
tie her to her crib,  
secured by neglect  
for safety's sake.

One dark day,  
loosed from her straps  
a human slap  
knocks her to ground  
and stops her fragile  
breath.

She craves a touch  
instead she is given death.

Some people do not have the chance to choose to believe that Life is or is not a Fountain. But if God is willing and circumstances are agreeing, we have a chance, we can choose to believe “Life is a fountain!”

An event happened recently in New York City which points in the same direction. The lead singer and piano player of a musical group called the Johnsons is named Anthony. He has performed all over the world, and is well-known by those who enjoy the genre of music he and the Johnsons love and play. He has received Mercury nominations and the respect of knowledgeable musical colleagues.

He appeared as the headliner at the Town Hall in 2005. A reviewer wrote, “On the Town Hall stage, the Johnsons grew quiet, and Anthony turned from the piano, his round eyes scanning the audience mischievously. He whistled - crystalline little bird call that lasted maybe five seconds. And then he did it again.

“The hall was silent. No one knew what he was doing. He seemed to feel the weight of many blank stares. But as he whistled again and kept at it, it became clear that Anthony would not stop. For all his delicacy, he is, like Lou Reed and Boy George, a survivor - an angel and a Viking at once.

“And then it happened. From way up in the balcony you could hear, just barely, a distant whistle back. Then more joined, and more. The whistling bounced around the hall, filling it with birdsong, and Anthony sat back, smiled and listened, relieved and grateful” (*The New York Times Magazine*, September, 2005).

Solidarity! That's what it is about. It is about being received and welcomed in a green place where growth is possible. The willingness to be vulnerable to and with one another and the openness to join one another is deciding that “Life is a fountain!” And we can drink of its life-giving water together or suffer like a parched plant in the dry, hot and burning deserts of life. Perhaps the church is at her best a community of people who have learned to whistle together. We choose not to make music or life's melodies alone.

Yes, first we are in this thing called life together. Our choices determine the quality of our lives.

**And second,**

And our choices are a matter of who we allow to control our lives. Do the forces of Death control us or does Life animate us? Will we allow some metaphorical “snake in the grass” to determine our worth, or will we follow the Forces of Life embodied in the God who has called us to follow Christ as our Lord of Life?

Jeremiah says that something is always being written upon our hearts; he says,

The sin of Judah is written with an iron pen,

engraved with a diamond point  
on the tablet of their heart ...  
Your wealth and all your treasures  
I shall hand over to be plundered because of your sin in high places...  
You will have to relinquish your heritage.

Who writes on your heart? Is Death as a Cosmic Force - sin and evil intent - writing on our hearts? Or are life and love, vulnerability and Christ's servant leadership tattooing messages of affection on our hearts?

A couple of years ago I noticed an advertisement of Tiffany's Signature Gift for Valentine's Day. It was a silver pendent in the shape of a heart engraved with the following endearment: "If found Please return to Tiffany and Company." And, friends, it is right on the front, so everyone will know where it came from and that it took a lot of money to buy it. And, of course, you can get it in gold as well.

If you lose your heart, where is it returned? "I will love the Lord my God with my all my heart and soul and mind and strength." And ""Where your heart is, there is your treasure." Tiffany and Company? What's engraved on your heart and mine?

"Life is a fountain!" Or "Life is not a fountain!" It is up to you to decide who you follow.

Both the Psalm we read and the Prophet Jeremiah tell us that those who believe "Life is a fountain!" have been planted in a nourishing environment. Listen to Jeremiah:

Blessed is anyone who trusts in Yahweh (the Lord God).  
He (or she) is like a tree by the waterside  
that thrusts its roots to the stream:  
when the heat comes it has nothing to fear,  
its foliage stays green;  
untroubled in a year of drought,  
it never stops bearing fruit.

And the psalmist sings,

They are like trees planted by streams of water,  
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither;

Now, here's the thing! The "tree" that is to say, you and I are not merely "planted." The better translation of the Hebrew verb is "transplanted." God has "transplanted" us from the arid desert wastes and placed us where we can grow and be transformed into new beings in Christ.

Who is in control of your life? It's up to you!

Another Jewish poet, Bob Dylan, says the same thing in this way:

You may be an ambassador to England or France,  
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance.  
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world,  
You might be a socialite with a long string of pearls.

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed,  
You're gonna have to serve somebody.  
Well it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord,  
But you're going have to serve somebody

Might like to wear cotton, you might like to wear silk.  
Might like to drink whiskey, might like to drink milk.  
You might like to eat caviar, you might like to eat bread.  
You might be sleeping on the floor, or sleeping in a king-sized bed.

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed  
You're gonna have to serve somebody  
Well it may be the devil, or it may be the Lord  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody ...

Who do you and I serve? What is engraved upon our hearts?

This Jewish story ends with a magnificent doxology, a hymn of sublime praise:

O glorious throne, exalted from the very beginning,  
shrine of our sanctuary! O hope of Israel! O Lord! ...  
O pool of Israel! (*An alternate translation*) O Lord,  
(You are) the fountain of living water!

Drink deep, my friends! Drink often, my beloved friends! And live!

Amen.