

“Take Hold of Life”
June 13, 2021

I Timothy 6:17-19
Mark 4:26-32

“Take hold of the life that really is life.”

Keep that phrase on your mind and in your heart for a few minutes. I want to come back to it because those are important words for this morning and for the months ahead. And its significance is better grasped after we consider those brief parables of Jesus.

A parable, of course, has no singular, absolute meaning. A parable is not like fable, at the end of which we learn the moral of the story. My own experience is that whatever meaning I have been able to discern from these stories of Jesus changes as I change and as the world changes.

As a result, I’m hearing something different this time around because there has been so much change in the past year and a half and we can expect a great deal of change in the months ahead.

Jesus focuses our attention on seeds. And behold! The small becomes great. The unseen becomes visible. It happens slowly: “First the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.”

Or, if you like, look at the tiny mustard seed becoming the greatest of all shrubs and putting forth large branches.

This is the time of year when we notice growth: flowers rise from bulbs and seeds, the fields show the beginning results of planting.

A couple of weeks ago the children of the church school met here at the church for an end of the year celebration. Ann and the Christian Education Board planned a great time filled with games and ice cream. The children hadn’t been together since the second Sunday of March, 2020. The adults knew there would be changes and they were joyfully astonished at how the children had grown.

And as seniors graduated from high school a week ago, parents were perhaps wistfully thinking with Tevye: “Is this the little girl I carried, Is this the little boy at play? I don’t remember growing older, when did they?”

We plant seeds. We do small acts of kindness. We make an effort to go in a particular direction. We study. We practice. Then one day we look around and...growth!

How does any of this happen? The sower in the parable has no idea. We, too, are often left asking: “How did *that* happen? Jesus doesn’t tell us. He simply speaks in parables—leaving it to us, his followers, to find new meaning in this growing and changing world.

Of course, these parables point to a shadow side as well.

A microscopic virus develops—we don’t know how. It infects a few humans—we don’t know how. And within a few months it becomes a global pandemic, bringing devastation, altering how we and the whole world have lived for the past year and a half and how we will live in the years to come.

Small lies are told about the election. They grow as they are told often enough and loudly enough and widely enough. Within a few months our nation is divided even further and voting rights are restricted with grave implications for our democracy.

We might not know how they grow, but the seeds we plant determine the harvest we reap.

When the seeds are good and the growth is good, we are invited to enjoy all the good things that arise: to marvel at the development of children, to celebrate with graduates, to move into a new phase of life with all our power, to reap the fields, to rejoice in the harvest.

It is here that I want to return to First Timothy—for it is there that we hear about enjoyment. And I think we *need* to hear about enjoyment in these days—or at least *I* need to hear about enjoyment. We have lived through some grim times—and, really, we are still living through those grim times. We know the losses that have surrounded us. We know the deadly seriousness that pervades our lives and our nation.

Because of this, let us call to mind and keep in mind the goodness that also surrounds us. When we are able, let us rejoice and be glad. Even if we are not certain about the goodness that surrounds us, let us by faith allow ourselves to take delight in these days. Since, as the scripture lesson suggests, God “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment,” let us enjoy what we can.

Many people are used to seeing pain as an opportunity to learn. And the understanding of the potential productivity of pain is a major insight. It is a major discovery that pain is not all waste and loss. No one is born knowing this and the excitement of this realization is so strong that people tend to stay with it.

This can limit us, especially now. Since we expect and even trust pain, we begin to look for it. But we can also learn by the careful observation of our own delight—and delight, enjoyment has the capacity to energize and unify.

Joy is one of the ways that we move into new life. Taking delight in something is one way that people find the energy to move toward actions like sharing.

Throughout First Timothy we constantly hear warnings about the perils of wealth. But these warnings do not come with the admonition to sell what you have and give the money to the poor—as Jesus advised one rich person, but not all. Instead, we who have are urged to do two things:

First, we are called to consider where our confidence lies. Who do you trust—what do you trust? Our social media is filled with lies, our leaders spread falsehoods. And in these days when stocks keep rising, we hear something surprising—our confidence lies not in wealth but in the God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

Through our enjoyment we participate in the abundance that God makes possible.

Second, we are to use what we have—to do good, indeed to be *rich* in good works, which is a different metric for measuring our wealth, isn’t it? We are to be rich in what we do, to be generous and ready to share.

I know that the Psalmist was not referring to graduation in saying: “We will shout for joy over your victory”—but that is certainly how we might feel upon that accomplishment—or upon any

successful conclusion. We never know all of the factors that lead to success. We do know, however, that failure and disappointment are usually a part of success. Setbacks come, growth can be stunted, progress might be thwarted.

Still, the silent growth is taking place.

And so, we come back to the encouragement with which I started this sermon: “Take hold of the life that really is life.”

This is the life that grows out of joy—deeper than the good times and the bad times that life hands out, stronger than our best attempts and worst failings—a joy that lifts us when we cannot lift ourselves, a peace that grasps us and returns us to the world renewed and restored.

Whatever our age, whatever our experiences, this is the authentic life that is given to us by the God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.