

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, God who gives us grace and goodness beyond measure, this Sunday we begin a new season, a new journey. This Sunday we begin the journey toward Jerusalem as we start this season of Lent. Throughout these forty days, help us to name those things that stand between us and you, those things that so easily clutter our hearts and minds, and to move beyond them. Help us seek your face and your ways alone, setting aside the wayward ways of the world.

Today, God, as we walk this Lenten path together, we ask many questions. We seek what balance means in our lives. It seems like we get different messages all over the place. Indeed, you know that balance is a hard virtue to achieve. We often don't know how much of one is good or too much or whether we are neglecting another side. We read about faith and works in a way that can be confusing to how to live our lives. Help us to negotiate this balance faithfully. Root us in love and goodness toward all, as that helps us keep the balance in tow. Feed us spiritually so that we may, in turn, feed our neighbors near and far. Help us remember that faith is only faith if it has hands and feet, not a lot of words. We pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our ever-faithful example, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

I was a pretty good young boy when I was in elementary school, but we all make mistakes. As a first grader, one day in recess, I took the challenge to walk the balance beam. There were a few in front of me and behind. I made it decently far before I started to lose my balance. I tipped this way and that. I was just trying to reestablish my balance and to get to the other side. I lost that battle and reached out for anything to stabilize me. I

found something but it wasn't the right thing to grab ahold of. The girl in front of me had a ponytail, and I unknowingly grabbed it in my mission to stay balanced. We both went tumbling down. It wasn't too far down, and we were both uninjured. I felt like a fool and apologized profusely, but she thought I had done it on purpose. She went and told the teacher, and as the kid who never wanted to get in trouble, I found I had unintentionally got in trouble by not maintaining my balance and suffering those consequences.

When you hear it right off the bat, the word "balance" is scary. Partly, it speaks to your daily life. You may say that you need to find balance between work and play, between taking care of yourself and taking care of others. Just like the trained Olympians performing all kinds of tricks on a balance beam, it seems like one little slip will send you over the edge. I know this from experience. Indeed, if we do not have balance, we can get into trouble as well, but with burnout, health troubles, and so forth. On the other hand, you also have the picture of the teeter-totter, the other playground mechanism on which you don't want balance. The Christian life is another place where we seek out what it means to "balance," although it is not that straightforward.

This Sunday, I pick up a new question from the basket. "How do we find a balance between church 'work' and spirituality and being fed?" Indeed, that is a difficult question, as it is a balance we all search for. The lifelong journey probably cannot be summed up in one sermon, but let's start a discussion. Balance as a whole seems to be a virtue on which the Christian life teeters back and forth, but maybe, when we look deeply at it, we see that balance really isn't balance at all. Perhaps what we often see is balance is more of a partnership. Let's explore together balance in the bible and what it means to carry a life of spiritual growth and the work of the Body of Christ.

Balance is an ongoing theme in the bible. We see this in the two passages from scripture today. First, we look at the book of Romans, Paul's final theological discussion. The Book of Romans is the foremost statement on grace in the Bible. He argues with a hypothetical opponent about the balance between grace and sin. "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means!" says Paul. There is no greater rebuttal than that in the Greek for Paul. In this case, balance doesn't really exist; we are to neglect sin in favor of the grace and the freedom from sin. This is known as sanctification, a purification that occurs through grace over time with devotion and growth in the Christian life. Grace does not depend on a balance but knows that we will sin as human beings throughout our lives. As Christians, we do not seek to do it, but we will. Our attitude toward sin is that we have died a kind of death with Christ where we die to sinful life. We die to lifting ourselves up. We die to neglecting others and treating others wastefully. We die to neglecting the service of God. In this case, we have the teeter totter. There is no balance between the two; one should be at the bottom while the other is lifted up. However, through our death to service that is not constructive to ourselves, our neighbor, or to God, we become empowered to live the life we are called to, a life of feeding and serving.

The other balance we look at in scripture today is the more complex balance. Part of this question goes to naming what it means to be a faithful Christian in the world today. It is a difficult thing, no doubt. For that, I turn to one of my favorite passages, from the book of James. "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you?" In a way, it seems that the author is arguing about two different things. The author may seem to be saying that works are more important than

faith. I believe this is a grave misinterpretation. Works are not better than faith, and faith is not better than works. What is not implied well is that one is intended to spark the other; faith brings about works. If there are no works to bring the faith to life and into the world, then it really isn't faith. It is something passive and lifeless. They work together; our true faith brings our actions to life.

I have to confess that I find it really annoying when prayer and talk of spirituality is the bottom line of Christianity. You are considered "pious" if bible reading, contemplation, and prayer are the sum of your faith practice. I don't believe that is really faithful, and that is what James seeks as well. The prophets throughout the Old Testament slammed the people because they wanted to rest on their laurels with what they considered faithfulness. In the same way, that was not Jesus. Jesus' ministry went out among the people, doing actions filled with support and guidance. I think this question interprets this fact well and hits the nail right on the head. On the one hand, we need to be fed. Spirituality, prayer, bible reading, and all these functions of the Christian life are to feed us. But feeding us also needs to take us somewhere. Feeding has a purpose, and that purpose is to do something with the energy we take in through our spiritual practice. That is where the works part of the equation comes in.

Perhaps the best way to sum up this question is not about arriving at a balance but an order or a cycle. Just as we need to feed our bodies before we go about any work, we need to feed our souls and spirits for the work of the Body of Christ. We need scripture reading to empower what we do and to teach us what is faithful. We need prayer to commune with God. We need worship to reorient ourselves to what is important. We need time with community to work together for the purposes of God and to be the naturally

relational people we were created to be. All of these are integral, but that is not the end of the story. This is where the work begins. All too often the church is viewed as a finish line when it should be seen as the starting line. We have a sign outside the church that says that worship is over; let the service begin. After so many viewings, the message can get lost in familiarity, but the message is just as relevant now as it ever was. Another question I could derive from the original question put to me is, "what is the basis of being fed spiritually?"

James talked all about how works give faith its meaning because it supplies faith with something to be seen and done. There is one thing we have not discussed that gives the faith behind the works power, what feeds our faith. Note that faith is a practice. James brought this to life with his discussion of faith being brought to completion with works. It is not simply belief. We do ourselves a disservice to consider faith a set of ideas that we agree upon; that, according to James, is a dead faith. That drains faith of all its power by making it a passive concept. Faith is active, but faith has a particular fuel. How do we grow and empower faith? Faith's fuel is in the basis of the Christian life: love. Love is the guiding force that gives faith its strength. Love gives the power to our spirituality because that is how we grow to know God. Indeed, what is spirituality if not to learn to love God through God's love and love our neighbors? I read a quote the other day, but I don't remember the original author. It said, "God doesn't ask us to serve the poor. God asks us to love the poor. If you love the poor, you will want to serve the poor." We do for others because we love them, and that love wants nothing in return but their happiness. Think about any of your close relationships where you love deeply. Perhaps this could be a relationship with your spouse, your child, your grandchild, a close friend. What would you do for this person? I think of those whom I deeply love, and there are very few things in my power I would not

do for them. This is our example, which we seek to carry out throughout the world in all our actions as Christians. Proper faith, rooted in love, is the empowerment for everything else. Love, in essence, makes you want to do the works James speaks of. The bible, telling us the words of Jesus, challenges us in this when it says, "Love your enemies, for what good is it to love those that love you?" Love is not a simple friendly task but a concept that stretches us and moves us. This love is in three parts: Love God, love your neighbor, love yourself. If you seek to love all of these things in good balance, your life move toward a faithful balance for you. It's easy for me to say and hard for us all to do.

We need both works and spirituality, as they live off one another. Grace is at work always in our hearts, but it also must be at work in our hands. Balance, though, is not something we just figure out. It takes time and practice to see how we best worship and how we best serve our role in the world. As with any diet, you need the correct formula of how much you put energy in with how much you utilize. In the same way, we are figuring out how to faithfully utilize our time and talents. Most importantly, we start with fostering love in all its forms. Love with God nurtures our faith, and faith empowers the work of growing spiritually and in our actions. The bottom line is that these are not separate things; they all interconnect for healthy Christian living. We do for others because we love; we grow closer to God and grow in faith because we love. We do not grow closer to God or in faith because we have great amounts of knowledge or because we have done great things to earn God's favor. The threads that run through all the diversity of scripture are clear. The balance we search for comes from a life rooted in love, grown fully and deeply in the goodness of God. Let us love accordingly, so that we may be fed and feed others in turn. Thanks be to God, amen and amen.