

**Southport Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. June Barrow**  
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**Looking to God**  
**John 5:17; 19-20 & John 15:10**

Friends, let's begin with the most basic, the most orienting truth. God is. He is the Eternal One, the Creator, and the Lord. And our lives find their center and the glory when they are set against the backdrop of the glory and grandeur of the God who is beyond time.

I was home not feeling well recently and watched a talk show. Over and over came the message: *Live your own truth. You alone know what is true for you, right for you.* The message was that each of us is our own touchstone, our own final reality.

And yet hasn't the secret knowledge been planted in each of us that there is more to us than that? That our lives are linked to one another and to God for eternity? That there is something higher to strive for than we can know in our brief lives? The culture says: "Live your own truth." But Jesus said, "I am the truth." I am not the source of my own life, of my own truth, of my own virtue and neither are you. And this is good news! As the psalmist writes:

**Your ways, O God, are holy. What god is so great as our God?**  
**You are the God who performs miracles;**  
**You display your power among the peoples.**  
**With your mighty arm you redeemed your people...**  
**You led your people like a flock...**  
(from Psalm 77)

We have been studying *Experiencing God* together and the overarching principle through the whole study is this: *The work belongs to God. God is always working. God initiates; we follow.*

As Psalm 23 says, "**He leads me... He guides me...**" All of us when we are new to faith, young in the faith, or just desperate, know what it's like to cry out in prayer: "Lord, fix it. Make what I want happen. I have an idea and I want you to bring your blessing over here and make my plans work out." But then we remember: God is God, the Eternal One, God Most High, the Almighty and Sovereign Lord. We remember that prayer is not simply getting God to respond to us, but also getting ourselves in line with God. God leads and we respond.

Jesus himself modeled this. John chapter 5 shows us the pattern that Jesus followed for his life.

**Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." ... Jesus gave them this answer: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these." (John 5: 17, 19-20)**

Jesus expresses this again in John 15:

**“If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.” (John 15:10)**

Here's the point again: The work belongs to God. God is always working. God initiates; we follow. God is God Most High and he purposes and ordains, he is at work, his plans are not thwarted, and the Bible is the record of how God works. Abraham didn't decide to create a great nation and invite God to help him in his plans. David didn't decide to become the king of Israel and then pray that God would help him realize his ambition. Rather, God purposed and Abraham and David were chosen and invited to be part of God's work. In the same way, we wait on God; we are invited to join God in His work.

Here's a story of an invitation I believe I received. In 1990, we moved to a new community. Our children were young, just eight and five. The first day we lived there, a neighbor came over to meet me and said this: “You'll be glad to know that they have re-districted and that your children won't have to go to school with the kids from .....” and she named a neighborhood I'd never heard of before. I could see that label: “The kids from.....” Soon after that, I drove past a sign marking the entrance to that neighborhood, pulled in and drove through. There were hundreds of trailer-homes, many of them quite nice and well kept and some of them very neglected. I lived in a little trailer home like that when I was very small and so I thought about those children, about the children that my neighbor was glad not to have to know. I thought of them so often that by the end of that summer, I stopped in to talk to the manager of the neighborhood and asked if I might come each Wednesday after school, use the community room, and have a club for the children, like a Sunday school class. Of course he immediately assumed I was part of a strange and dangerous cult, and it took a lot of conversation to convince him that wasn't so. He was full of objections, but ultimately he agreed.

For the next four or five years, each Wednesday I make gallons of lemonade, baked thirty cupcakes, planned games and prizes and songs and a Bible story lesson. I picked up my own children who were in elementary school 20 minutes before school ended, and we went together to get set up for a loud, restless, hungry group of children who would descend off the school bus and rush inside.

Now and then, there was a day when it all went very smoothly, and I remember thinking, “You know, if someone were secretly filming this, it would look like a very successful program.” But more often, it was just the opposite and I would think, “Oh, if anyone were filming this, they'd think I was incompetent and maybe not even in control.” Sometimes fights broke out, once chairs were thrown. And my son Nathan, who was only in first or second grade, said to me once, “Mom, I agree we should come and do this, but I think you should know that I am learning a lot of bad words.” We all were. One of the women who worked in the office gave me her opinion of all of this several times. Once she said, “You know, don't you, these kids only come for the cupcakes?” I said, “You're probably right.”

I met children who been in ten different schools by the time they were in second grade, children who had never heard of Mary or Joseph, who had never heard that Easter involved a cross and an empty tomb, and who had never heard the name of Jesus except as a curse. Many had never heard that God made them and loved them. Some of them wanted to come to church with me, and so I got to know some their mothers and their families. I very often didn't know what to think about what I saw or how to help where I saw real need.

One day during those years, I got a phone call out of the blue from Wheeler Mission, the downtown mission we support. Someone I didn't know called to say she had received my name from someone else I didn't know. She asked me if I would come to Wheeler Mission's summer camp for children in Brown County for one week to be the Bible story lady. Normally that would have been difficult to do, but the week I was needed was the one week that my children had been invited on a trip with their

grandparents. I had the week open. I went and got to know children of the families that Wheeler works with, children who are part of generational poverty and all that that kind of poverty means. I had a chance to see it first-hand.

Children from my church donated their old stuffed animals to give to the children at camp. Each toy was washed, dried, decorated with a fresh ribbon, and placed on a bunk, awaiting a child. When the kids climbed off the bus and came into their cabins, they were delighted to have a new toy that was all theirs. One little boy would not let his go. He tucked his t-shirt into his shorts and kept the stuffed animal against his tummy. He walked around with the lump in his shirt all day long. He couldn't be persuaded to leave the toy on his bed. Why not? Because his life had taught him that his possessions would never be respected, that no adult would keep his things safe, that if he let go of something he loved, it would be stolen or destroyed.

Now, were any of these efforts of mine "successful?" I don't know. I am not in touch with any of those children. I don't know what happened to any of them. So I have no evidence that these invitations that came to me produced anything that looks like "success." From this distance, however, I completely believe that these were invitations from God, invitations to join in something God was doing.

Consider this: God is more interested in your character than your activity. God's will is not simply for you to "do", but for you to "become". God is at work in us in the between times, in the mean time, in the ordinary time. God is shaping our character, through challenges and ordinary life, through ups and downs, through people and circumstances. When we belong to God, there is no time when God is not present with us, working in us to change us. We must challenge the idea that God is present where success is. Those invitations I received to work in a community near my home, to work at a summer camp – did it do any good? I know this: it made a difference in me. Listen to this from Jeremiah, about the potter and the clay:

**This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. (Jeremiah 18:1-4)**

Friends, we are not called to be successful, but to be faithful, to be obedient to God's call. We are called to be mold-able. I don't know how God might have been at work in any of those children but certainly God was at work in me. Working in that little community for four years, working at Wheeler Missions children's camp for one week showed me families and situations I would never otherwise have known. And I think it deepened in me that compassionate space inside that each of us has. Those invitations to work with God certainly changed me.

So here's the principle again: The work belongs to God. God is always working. God initiates; we follow. God shapes and changes us.

When I was a young mother at home with my children, my husband was very seldom home. He worked full time and went to school full time. During those years, I had no close friends – no one to shop with, have lunch with, no one to call me up for a chat. I don't know why that was because I prayed for a friend many times. But that prayer was not answered. One of the results of those years was that by the time I went to seminary I was longing for community, longing to be part of a group, longing to belong.

My seminary was full of very nice, very interesting, very smart professors and students. But most of them did not believe as I do. For instance, most of my professors didn't believe in the divinity of Jesus, didn't believe in the resurrection. I sat through classes listening to lectures thinking, "Surely, someone is going to speak up... someone will present another view point." I'd wait. And then I'd tell myself, "I don't have to speak. I can just sit here quietly. I'm not in charge of this class..." But eventually my hand would go up and I would begin, "I disagree."

I have never been able to speak up like this easily or coolly or in an off-handed manner. Always dread settled over me, my heart pounded, I felt I couldn't breathe, my hands shook, and I always felt I hadn't spoken gracefully. I would think: "I'm not good at this." Yet over and over again, it seemed I had to speak up. And it wasn't just seminary; I've been in situations like that over and over again for 15 years.

Not until I was preparing for this message did it occur to me that perhaps these situations were a gift to me, an invitation from God, an opportunity for my character to toughen up a bit. Perhaps God was at work in me.

One more small story. Last fall I visited my daughter Emily and grandson Joey at their home in Pennsylvania. Emily talked and talked about this new adventure of parenting that she and her husband Marc are sharing. She said, "Marc and I were just saying that we hope when Joey grows up he wants to be a Christian, but we know that we can't make that happen. That will be between Joey and God." She's right of course. For our children and all those we love, the story of their faith is a story that gets written just between them and God, and we can't control it, no matter how we'd like to. As she talked, I thought about everything Al and I had done as we raised our kids: Sunday school, Vacation Bible School, Church Camp, and our inconsistent efforts at family devotions. And so I said to her, "Well, what about you? Why do you think that when you became an adult, you wanted to be a follower of Christ? What was it for you?" Without a second's hesitation she said, "It was going to the trailer park."

God is writing the plan. God is leading and working and wooing and inviting and reaching out. He is building character, shaping and molding his people. We do not know his plans. As scripture tells us, His ways are not our ways; His purposes are higher than our purposes. Our responsibility is simply to respond when we sense that God is inviting us to participate in His plans.

Will you pray this prayer with me: **Lord, I will do whatever you say. I will confess whatever you ask me to. I will obey what you command. I will receive what you give. I will believe what you say is true. Help me to trust and follow and believe and receive. Thank you, thank you, Lord. I trust in the name of Jesus. Amen**