

Planted By the River

Psalm 1; Jeremiah 17:1-10

My house in Valdosta was built on land that used to be a pecan orchard. The Air Force officer that had it built must have really like pecan trees, because he wedged the house right in between three mature trees. We had seven trees on our half acre lot, and so we had all the pecans we wanted.

But pecans are funny. Once they fall off the tree, on the outside, they all look alike. The shell is going to develop, no matter what. Now, a dry year or disease can cause the meat inside to wither away or turn dark and bitter. But until you crack them open, you can't tell if they are any good inside.

That's what Jeremiah tells us about our own hearts in verse 9: they tend to deceive us. Like pecans, we know how to make ourselves look good on the outside. We know how to rationalize our sin, to channel it in socially acceptable ways. We even know how to make ourselves look good in our own eyes, as we can so easily justify our selfish desires.

And that's why, when we look at Psalm 1, or even at the first few verses of Jeremiah 17, we can find lots of reasons for self-congratulation. After all, we Evangelical Presbyterians don't scoff at the law of the Lord. The Essentials of our Faith clearly state what we believe: "All Scripture is self-attesting and being Truth, requires our unreserved submission in all areas of life.... The Bible, uniquely and fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, is the supreme and final authority on all matters on which it speaks." At the time of their ordination, all our officers must declare that they believe "the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the Word of God, totally trustworthy, fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, the supreme, final, and the only infallible rule of faith and practice." No, we don't sit in the seat of scoffers.

And we don't do the kinds of things that Jeremiah condemned so forcefully in the first few verses of chapter 17 – we don't worship Asherim, pagan fertility symbols. We don't go up onto high places and engage in weird rituals. No, we know what's right and wrong.

But remember Jeremiah's warning in verse 9 – our hearts can deceive us. Sin has a way of hiding from us. And perhaps that's why when Jeremiah makes the same sort of contrast between the righteous and the wicked that Psalm 1 makes, he focuses less on what people do – standing in the way of sinners or sitting in the seat of scoffers, than on why people do it. To help us determine the true state of our hearts, he chooses to highlight our motivations rather than our actions. For Jeremiah, the critical question is, "Whom do you trust?"

Now, Jeremiah does understand that actions are important, and that actions have consequences. In fact, he portrays God's blessings in the same way that the Psalmist does. Living as they did in a semi-arid land, both writers knew how critical a source of water could be. A tree planted by a stream would constantly be nourished. As it stretched out its roots toward the water, its leaves would remain green and its fruit would be full and good. In contrast, both Jeremiah and the Psalmist understood what happens to all plants that inhabit parched, desert areas. They dry up like chaff and blow away.

But in comparing people to these two kinds of plants, Jeremiah doesn't speak so much about what they do – on the one hand meditating on the law of the Lord, and on the other hand scoffing at it.

No, he digs down a little deeper. He compares the reason these two groups of people feel the way they do about God's law.

For why, after all, would anyone scoff at God's law? Wouldn't it be because a scoffer is, at root, trusting in someone or something else to guide him? Someone who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength won't have any use for God's Word, right? For why should he? Why should such a scoffer care about what he would consider to be just the thoughts of some strange Jewish men who lived a long time ago? Why look to the Bible for truth when you can trust your own reason, your own experience, your own resources – as Jeremiah put it, your own arm, your own strength?

And so as we come to the Lord's table, we Christians need to search our deceitful hearts the way that God says He does in verse 10. No matter what we may look like on the outside, no matter what we say we believe, we need to ask ourselves – where does our trust really lie? No, we don't go up on high places to worship the pagan goddess Asherah. But when we have difficult decisions to make, do we do whatever makes sense to us? Do we follow our feelings when temptation arises? Do we look to our paychecks or our Social Security payments or our bankbooks to put our next meal on the table? On this Independence Day weekend, are we Americans putting our trust in our own freedom, or in the system of government devised by our Founding Fathers? If so, are we really any different from those wicked scoffers Psalm 1 condemns? Are we trusting in mankind, in our own arm, our own strength? And if so, should we be surprised if we find ourselves drying up on the inside like those disease or drought-ridden pecans?

Okay, so what about the righteous people in Psalm 1? Why would anyone reject the counsel of the wicked scoffers and instead choose to meditate on God's law? Jeremiah tells us in verse 7: it's because he trusts in the Lord. It's because his hope is in the Lord.

And as we Christians come to the Lord's table this morning, don't we have even more reason to trust in the Lord? After all, we know the tremendous price God paid to redeem us. We know that Christ laid down His life so that sinners like us might be forgiven. And we know that He has risen from the dead not only so that we can be sure that we will live with Him forever, but also so that we might experience new life today, life that is free from the power of sin and death.

So, if you are truly trusting in the Lord today, if you have been baptized and have made a public profession of your faith in Christ, if you are a member of any congregation of the Body of Christ, you are welcome at this table. Even if your sin is so great, so grievous to you that it feels like it's been scarred into your heart with a diamond-tipped iron pen, come knowing that Christ's sacrifice is sufficient to make you clean, to make you whole.

So if you truly repent of your sins, if you are in love and charity with your neighbors, and if you intend to follow the commandments of God, and to walk in His holy ways, draw near with faith. Come to the Living Water that will make your leaves green and your fruit full and good. As you acknowledge Him as Savior and surrender to Him as Lord, let His blood wash away your sin and give you a new life, an abundant life. Come to Christ and be filled.