

**Sermon**

**“Gold Medals All Around”**

July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Based on Ezekiel 17:22-24 and Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17

**SCRIPTURE:**

**Ezekiel 17:22-24**

<sup>22</sup> Thus says the Lord God: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. <sup>23</sup> On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. <sup>24</sup> All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it. [NRSV]

**Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17**

<sup>1</sup> Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy. <sup>2</sup> Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you; save your servant who trusts in you. You are my God; <sup>3</sup> be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all day long. <sup>4</sup> Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. <sup>5</sup> For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you. <sup>6</sup> Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication. <sup>7</sup> In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me. <sup>8</sup> There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours. <sup>9</sup> All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name. <sup>10</sup> For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God.

<sup>16</sup> Turn to me and be gracious to me; give your strength to your servant; save the child of your serving-maid. <sup>17</sup> Show me a sign of your favor, so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame, because you, Lord, have helped me and comforted me. [NRSV]

**OPENING PRAYER:** Holy God, we walk by faith and not by sight. So continue to guide our steps in your Word today that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we may find our way in your way. Through Jesus the Christ, we pray; and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

## A Time of Rapid Change

Compared to any point in human history, we live in a time of rapid change. Even if you consider only the past one hundred years, change now occurs in increments of weeks, days, or even hours rather than in increments of years, generations, or lifetimes.

Naturally, this causes us to be more in a constant state of flexibility—always adjusting our habits and routines, and always re-evaluating our best practices—in our personal lives, our family lives, our social lives, our professional lives, even our faith lives and more.

Along the way, some traditions that people hold dear continue on, while change dictates that other traditions or routines are laid down, set aside, and discarded.

## I Don't Usually Fret

Now, I'm not usually the type of person to lament when things change. As a general rule, I don't fret or worry. I typically take things in stride. And, I'm in favor of progress. In fact, I think it's exciting when things evolve and change, even if such evolving and changing seems scary or daunting.

But, before anyone thinks I'm about to jump off the deep end this morning, let me start getting to the point (and please bear with me). While I *usually* don't fret much, here's one example of something that's changed in my lifetime that does make me fret ... kids on sports teams getting trophies and awards just for showing up!

When I was young and played on teams in various sports leagues, you only got a trophy or an award for earning 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, or 3<sup>rd</sup> place—like the Olympics. Sure, sometimes a simple ribbon was given as a consolation prize for entering a tournament or track meet or something. But, by and large, real scores were kept in games, healthy competition was taught and encouraged, and trophies and medals were given to the best-placed teams or individuals.

But, that's changed in many places today. And, I can vividly remember the bewilderment on my face when my daughter, Nicole, started playing soccer in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade, and I learned for the first time that scores aren't officially kept in many

youth sports leagues now. That's right, in lots of places, anyone who signs up to play will be rewarded at the end of the season.

Now, please understand, I don't mean to disparage anyone of any age. And, it's not that I'm opposed to supporting the involvement of children and youth in competitive pursuits. And, it's not that I think that we should be reinforcing the idea of winning at all costs either.

I just feel that, the older we get, too much of the other parts of our lives reflect a very different reality than everyone getting a trophy or medal just for showing up. And, I lament, and I fret, that we teach something opposite to our kids in the early parts of their lives.

### **But I May Be Wrong**

However, as seems to be the case more often than not as *I* grow older, while I may lament and I may fret, I may also be wrong. I may be wrong that the change I've just described with sports leagues and keeping scores and handing our trophies is such a bad thing. And, I may be wrong that we are teaching something other than reality to our young. After all, I've completed plenty of running and other athletic events as an adult, and what did I get for showing up those mornings and participating—I got a t-shirt, and sometimes also a finisher's medal—similar to just this past Thursday morning, when I ran in, and completed, the Peachtree Road Race, and once again, I got a finisher's t-shirt. Thousands of people did. We didn't have to win, and we didn't even have to finish in the top 3 of our age group. Just for taking part in the event and completing it, everyone received a trophy (so to speak).

### **Life is Hard—We Get Stuck in the Mud**

Which is one reason why, in fact, I *know* I am wrong about all the stuff I just described about sports leagues and keeping scores and handing our trophies. Because the reality is that while playing sports and running road races is hard ... life overall is harder. The reality is that life is full of both sunny days and rainy days. And, the reality is that rain causes mud, and the reality is that no one is exempt from getting stuck in the mud.

We all have such days and periods in our lives, often due to a variety of events

and circumstances that are largely, or even completely, out of our control. We get stuck in the mud. We get bogged down. We get overwhelmed. And, we reach a point where sometimes it's all we can do to just show up. We reach a point where we need a glimpse, or a word, of hope again.

### **Words of Hope**

That's why I think both of today's scripture readings are so wonderfully powerful. Both passages speak words of hope to people of faith across all times and places—words of reassurance and even optimism during times of crisis and of feeling overwhelmed and of being stuck in the mud and muck of life. The prophet speaks words of hope and wonder that God will take something small, unassuming, and seemingly insignificant and produce something large, fruitful, useful, and amazing from it; that God will take a mere sprig of a tree and plant it high on a lofty mountain—a place normally considered inhospitable to life—and it will bear fruit and provide a habitat for God's creatures and reveal God's goodness to the world. Likewise, the psalmist proclaims that the Lord is good and forgiving and does wondrous things—that the Lord is abounding in steadfast love; that God will hear our prayers and listen to our cries for help; and that God will indeed answer. These are certainly words of hope.

We are God's people, and we are also both a hurting and hopeful people. Events and circumstances in our lives and around the world, both near and far away, continually remind us that any one single person, or groups of people, can hurt. But, we can also hope as well. And, when we get bogged down and stuck in the mud, sometimes it just takes a few words of hope to get us going again. And, I want to share with you some of the most hopeful words I've ever read outside of scripture ...

### **Get Up, Dress Up, Show Up**

A woman named Regina Brett, who apparently knows a thing or two about life's challenges and difficulties and being stuck in the mud, authored a book called *God Never Blinks: 50 Lessons for Life's Little Detours*. And, within the book are gem after gem of comfort, guidance, and hope.

In Lesson 46 she writes about how days and times of being stuck in the mud

is sometimes part of the human condition. “We’ve all been to those places. We all have a personal pool of quicksand inside us where we begin to sink and need friends and family to find us and remind us of all the good that has been and will be.”<sup>1</sup> She describes such fragile days as “handle-with-prayer days.” I like that phrase—it seems so fitting.

And, she goes on to explain what to do with these “handle-with-prayer days.” She writes:

*“Over the years, I’ve developed a simple emergency response plan to use as soon as I feel the hurricane of those blue days blowing:*

*Have a 911 list of people who get it. Not the type A’s who will tell you to suck it up and offer 20 ways to multitask your way through it, but people who know your favorite ice cream, candy bar, music, or movie to coax you back.*

*Avoid mean people, especially at work. And don’t poke the gorilla boss. Stay away from the cage.*

*Don’t do anything you don’t absolutely have to do that day. Cancel anything that is negotiable.*

*Make no major decisions about your marriage, your career, your diet, or your self-worth. You are under the influence of a bad day. Don’t analyze anything. Stay out of your head. It’s not a safe place today.*

*Don’t ‘awfulize’ what you’re feeling. The world isn’t ending. You are just experiencing turbulence. The plane is safe. The pilot is good. You’re in the right seat of life. You just hit a patch of bumpy air. Wait. It will pass.*

*I admit, on those rough days, I’m tempted to call off work and take a mental health day. Instead, I give myself permission to lower my standards for the next 24 hours. I take my friend Don’s advice: Get up, dress up, and show up. Trim life down to its bare essentials.*

*Get up: Face the day vertical instead of surrendering to it horizontally.*

*Dress up: Put on your clothes, from head to toes. It triggers hope. I believe that’s why, even in the poorest third-world countries, women adorn themselves with bright*

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<sup>1</sup> Brett, Regina. God Never Blinks: 50 Lessons for Life’s Little Detours. Grand Central Publishing: New York/Boston, p.210.

*scarves, colorful beads, and glittering shells.*

*Show up: Most of life is showing up. It's a come-as-you-are day. To be a success, you do the best you can, which varies from day to day. My best today might suck, but if I show up, I've done the best I can do today.*

*If that's all you do, in the Olympics of life, you're a success. Getting up earns you a bronze medal. Dressing up gives you the silver. Showing up wins you the gold.*

*Once you do those three things, anything can happen.”<sup>2</sup>*

### **Gold Medals All Around**

Indeed, at the end of day, the reality is that a whole lot of living life these days is about just showing up and getting a trophy. Because the reality is that life is hard. The reality is that life is full of both sunny days and rainy days. And, the reality is that rain causes mud, and no one is exempt from getting stuck in the mud.

Yet, we are God's people, and as much as we may hurt, we are also a hopeful people. And, so we do the best we can, even if sometimes that means barely being able to get out of bed in the morning.

But, friends, let us never forget what God can do with a mere sprig. So whether we are experiencing good times or bad times, if we can just remember to get up, dress up, and show up, then we'll get our gold medal and we'll know that anything can happen from there. Just consider all that you've already accomplished today alone. Looks to me like it's gold medals all around!

And, thanks be to God for that! Amen!

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, pp.211-213