

June 30, 2024- 1st presbyterian church message – HOW WE SEE LIFE

Read Scripture: Psalm 139: 7-18

So happy to be with you.

I am always grateful for the opportunity to talk about Jesus
... so thank you for inviting me to share.

If I asked ten of you how you SEE LIFE (your view of life, your perspective, understanding or description of life)...I'm sure I'd get 10 different answers....

....Exciting challenging disappointing, confusing fulfilling, mysterious, energizing, exhausting.... --- it's not easy to describe

And **defining what life IS** can be even more difficult!
I've heard a lot of different suggestions.....

There's the old standard...

Life is: A bowl of cherries. Then in the 70's we got Erma Bombeck's counter to that with her book titled...."if life is a bowl of cherries, what am I doing in the pits?"

More recently I've heard that Life is: what you make it.

I don't see it... 'Cause there's a lot of life that's happened for me that I didn't make at all! And I never would have made it that way, and I don't even see how I could!

How 'bout this one: Life is: practice for heaven

It sounds nice, but I can't buy that either....and here's why.

There are all kinds of things that we do here on earth that we won't be doing in heaven! I'm talking about things that we are even CALLED to do!

Here are some examples....

We will not be evangelizing in heaven....we won't be leading anybody to Christ, we won't be comforting people in their grief, we won't be bearing each other's burdens, and we won't be persevering through trials and tribulations

And a lot of the work we do here on earth won't be done in heaven...no doctors, or nurses, or pharmacistsnope none of that. And here's a biggie for me....I won't be singing at any funerals!

So, I'd say, life is NOT a bowl of cherries, or what we make it, or even practice for heaven,But there is one way of looking at life that resonates with me, and that I find supported in the Bible....that Life is a journey.

(The Bible is full of descriptions of life that involve movement...like walking, running, climbing, coming, going, traveling...)

And this life journey is something every human experiences.
No getting around it

It's also a faith journey, and not just for followers of Jesus, but for everyone, because everyone puts their faith in something!

So if we we're going to describe life as "a journey"then I think we should take a few moments to ponder what the ROAD we're traveling on looks like:

From my experience and from what I've seen, **life's road is not a straight line**....there are twists and turns, , forks, and branches and "Y"s... lots of "whys". And this rambling road can seem really frustrating....confusing...even scary... like a puzzling, incomplete map!

You know, In medieval times, the cartographers, the map makers,.....when they got to a border and didn't know what was beyond it.... they wrote...."Here be dragons" They didn't know what was there so they assumed the worst, and tried to quell the questions, or hide their uncertainty.

How 'bout us....on our faith journey, In those places on the road of life where we don't know what's ahead, Maybe we've imagined something scary and terrible, filled in the blanks with our fears, avoided the unexpected,, and then just kept wishing so badly for a straight line life!

one of my favorite writers is a man named Eric Sloane, He's an author of early American history, and an artist – he wrote about life in bygone eras – the simplicity, the purpose, the priorities, of life in the “old days” and he illustrated historically accurate pencil drawings that gave a beautiful visual to his words.

I've been reading one of his books titled, “Our Vanishing Landscape”, In it, Sloane describes how roads used to be built and how they were designed. He explains that back in the day, a curving road was preferred to a straight road!

A curving road was created on purpose! They could have made a road that went straight for miles, but they chose to create curving, winding roads intentionally!

They believed that although the road was a way to get from here to there, it was Not just meant to be functional....it was also meant to be fulfilling!

It was a way forward AND a work of art!

I was given a tour of your church grounds a few weeks ago.....and in it I saw , that Right here on the church property, you've implemented this curving road concept..... Your “peace garden” and the pathway through it is a mini picture of the curving road design.

In Eric Sloane's book, he continues the description the winding road, and references a man named William Hogarth – Hogarth was a popular and influential artist from the 1700's. He asserted that profound and optimal beauty was found in a curving line! Optimal beauty! – the most desirable – the best!

Then I read that Hogarth had a name for his artistic curving theory, -----he called it “The Line Of Grace”! Unbelievable!
What a beautiful name...What a beautiful concept.

And not just for road building – but for life-building...

That curve in the road we didn't expect, that change of direction that felt so jarring, that twist in the plans, that turn of events,could it actually be a line of GRACE? God's way of showing us beauty we wouldn't see otherwise. God's way of sparing us from the panic and dread of seeing TOO FAR down the road..... God's way of surprising us with something around the next corner? Or a bend in the road to protect us from something?! To AVOID an obstacle, a danger,could it be that the uphill climb strengthened us to face what was on the other side?

What if we began to view the curving road of our faith journey as THE LINE OF GRACE. The purposeful, profound, and sometimes painful way God leads us through.

Seeing our life's journey as a LINE OF GRACE changes our perspective. It changes how we see life.

Our faith journey becomes more than just a random road that takes us from earth to heaven, It becomes a transformative spiritual experience.

The curving pathway of our life journey points us into the unknown, which enlivens our faith, stirs our hearts, tests our resolve, ignites our imagination, builds our hope, challenges our assumptions, and helps us embrace the present.

then I got to thinking....what about those times when WE cause a kink in the road, a u-turn, or a crooked place that's of our own doing? A mistake, a bad choice, sin, or what about the painful effects of free will, from ourselves or from someone else... the reality of suffering and heartache in an imperfect world.....What about then? Even there, we can see a line of grace.....God's grace, demonstrated through His forgiveness, and through His redemption, and through His comfort.

This curving journey of life is Not ONLY a gracious design but a place where we receive the gifts of grace given to us personally by Jesus.....it's relational, experiential... Intimate... ...a journey where we have the opportunity **not only to see God's handiwork, but to see God Himself !**

In the book of Matthew we read the story of Jesus' miraculous birth through Mary, and the Holy Spirit.....Matt 1:22 says ²² Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³ "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD

AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL,” which translated means, **“GOD WITH US.”**

The Bible is full of references to God’s presence in our lives. You might even have some of them memorized. “I will never leave you or forsake you”, “I am with you always even to the end of the age.”

And our sermon scripture this morning, from Psalm 139 says over and over, that God is with us no matter where we go!

But sometimes we can have head knowledge of God’s presence, in the big picture, on paper, in theory, ...but miss the experience of seeing Jesus present, and interacting with us in the details, personally.... on our own life’s road.

When I exercise I like to listen to worship music, and especially when I’m on a run because running is not easy for me. To get me through the run, I got in the habit of mentally singing through a long list of worship songs as I went.... and it distracted me from how much farther I had to go! A while ago I felt like I needed to make it more meaningful, and less methodical, so I started choosing just one worship song for each run, and then analyzing each line of the song, asking if I believed it, and if it was true in my life. This turned out to be a pretty rigorous and intense exercise!

One morning the song that popped into my head to use for the run was “Every Move I make I make in You – you make me move Jesus”... And I thought, nice! Here we go! That’s gonna be an easy one! - cuz that’s pretty much **a song for the kids!** light and fun, nothing too deep. This’ll be a breeze...actually maybe too easy...and too short to last my whole run!. Maybe I should pick a different song....But I felt a nudge in my spirit....just do it Shelly. Take every line, just like you have on other “deeper” songs, and ask yourself if you believe it, and if it’s true in your life”

So, I started going through every line....

Every move I make I make in you, Yes lord, You are the one that created my body, so that I can run! Every step I take I take in You - yes, absolutely, You are my motivation, to keep going, yep, yep, and I’m just rolling through the words...

Waves of mercy waves of grace...oh, yes, Jesus, I need your mercy and grace every moment.

Then I got to the part in the song that says....Everywhere I look, I see Your face. I looked around as I was running, it was beautiful – I saw all of God’s creation, the beautiful trees, sky, flowers, and now I’m lifting my hands as I’m running along – **praise you Lord – for your beautiful creation – I see Your face in it!** -- and then the Lord said...that’s an easy place to see my face, shelly. What? What Lord? Yeah, Shelly, I said, that’s an easy place to see my face.

Well, what do you mean, Lord? I mean this creation is inspiring, and glorious, and so uplifting.....it took miraculous power for you to create this for us!

Lord said again....yep, all true.....but that's an easy place to see my face.

Well, Lord,....I'm sputtering...trying to keep running....what's going on?

Jesus says to me.....What about the hard places.

What about the painful places. What about the ugly places in your life.

See your face there, Lord? No, not there.

....no Lord, You're too beautiful to be seen there! You're lovely and pure, and perfect.....

But Jesus isn't letting it go!

Yes, Shelly, THERE.

There, in that despair, in that confusion, in that failure, in that fear, in that weakness, in that abuse, in that betrayal, in that place of woundedness, in that thing that you want to get completely out of your memory, in THAT place, Can you see my face THERE?

And now I was running with tears streaming down my cheeks.

Lord! It hurts even to think about....and YOU want to be there -- IN all those places of brokenness? Jesus said....See my face, there. And the face I saw in that moment wasn't condemning, or disgusted, or impatient. It was pure love, understanding, and tenderness. I saw Jesus grieving with me, over my sin and over my suffering.

And somehow I felt grateful...loved more deeply....whole, and FREE.

Now I'm running down the street crying, and saying...Thank you Lord. Thank you Jesus. Thank you for being THERE – in the beautiful and in the broken.

EVERYWHERE I LOOK - I SEE YOUR FACE! – YES LORD!

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AND I'll never, ever think of that as just a “kids song” again!

I was transformed!

When Jesus is present in our troubles, it doesn't tarnish His beauty, or diminish His glory, or mar His perfection. God is uncorruptible. Jesus intimate presence in the dark parts of our lives doesn't change Him, it changes us!

That's the line of grace....God's grace.

When we are able to see Jesus' face in our worst moments, it opens us up for healing, comfort and freedom from shame. If we leave God out of our pain and anguish it's

isolating. But when we see Jesus there, we realize we're not alone and that Jesus treats our weakness tenderly. – which means we have no reason to hide.

I was afraid that Seeing Jesus face in the painful places would accentuate them, and make them bigger.

But instead of heightening the dark, Jesus' presence LIGHTENED it!)

In 2 Corinthians 4 verses 4-6 we read..

⁶ For God, who said, "Let there be light in the darkness," has made this light shine in our hearts so we could know the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ.

The phrase, Seeing the face of Jesus, means experiencing God's presence, His LIGHT,–His essence – and His character, personally - and when we know God's character, we recognize Jesus' face and it creates a sense of intimacy, a deep relational experience – like the reassurance the comes from seeing the face of a friend!

It engages our hearts....not just our heads.

Seeing Jesus' face creates attachment, bonding, and connection

– let's look at the book of Job chapter 42 (scary to go to the book of Job)

But at the very end of the book.....after Job has been through all of these super difficult things....he says this to God"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You!" This was not a physical seeing, but seeing into the heart of God. A closeness born out of traveling through pain WITH GOD....

And this indicates movement....we don't have to stay stuck in our past or stuck in our suffering...Jesus face shows us a way forward together..

In fact, Jesus presence with us on our life journey actually gives us JOY! The Bible says so!

Psalm 16:11 says "You will make known to me the path of life – in YOUR PRESENCE is fullness of joy.

Fullness of JOY – not because the path of life is perfect, but because God's presence is on the path.

And it's that presence that leads us to PEACE - seeing Jesus' face everywhere gives us PEACE, a calm reassurance that the one truly reliable, uncorruptable God,– is by our side – the ONLY thing worth putting our faith in.

It's not always easy to see Jesus face on our life journey. . . If we're having trouble seeing it, There could be something blocking our sight!

Let's look at John 20:1-15 the context...shortly after the crucifixion of Jesus...He has been buried, Mary goes to bring spices to his body in the tomb, but He's not there.....We'll pick up the story at verse 11.

¹¹ Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." ¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

¹⁵ He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus was right there! But she didn't recognize Him.

Could this be true of us....on our life's journey?....that Jesus is right there, but we don't see Him? We don't recognize His face?

-maybe, like Mary, we don't recognize Jesus because we aren't **expecting** Him to be there, in our deepest grief!

-maybe we're too **distracted** by our hopeless circumstances .. looking at what we're facing....instead of looking at Jesus' face.

-maybe we can't imagine Jesus in all of His beauty.... **wanting to be present in our ugly places.**

-OR maybe **our perception of God's character is so distorted** and negative that we're not sure we even WANT to see Jesus there.

The truth is, God's character is compassionate, kind, holy, just, forgiving, and filled with perfect love. – poured out for each one of us – for all of humanity, that's why Jesus came to earth – to be Immanuel – God with us!

Jesus chooses to be with us.....it's right where God wants to be! And Jesus' presence is loving, interactive, restorative, and strong!

Zephaniah 3:17 reads...

"The LORD your God is in your midst,
A victorious warrior.
He will exult over you with joy,
He will be quiet in His love,
He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy.

In the New international version it says... The LORD your God is with you,
the Mighty Warrior who saves.
He will take great delight in you;
in his love he will no longer rebuke you,
but will rejoice over you with singing."

When we believe God wants to be with us, it gives us confidence to LOOK FOR HIM! Seek Jesus' Face! Pursue intimacy, relationship, interaction with God, and a deeper sense of God's presence – all the time - everywhere.

Psalm 27:8

"Lord, When You said "Seek My Face", my heart said to You, Your face,
Oh Lord, I shall seek!"

IT takes intention – awareness – diligence – expectation – and the eyes of our heart to be open - to see Jesus' face on every part of life's journey. -
And the beautiful thing is once we see Jesus' face there,we will see His face more and more!

Have you ever bought a new car, and you'd hardly ever seen that particular car on the road, but now you see it everywhere! The cars were always there, but you didn't notice them! Now you see them because you are aware in a new experiential way – you have a personal awareness, based on your own connection with that car....your eyes have been opened to it's presence on the road!

This phenomenon works the same way with God....once we see Jesus' face, and have an experiential, personal awareness, we are able to see Jesus more and more because our eyes have been opened to His presence on OUR life's road.

Remember this: God may be invisible....but God is not out of sight! (repeat)

Finally, for just a moment, Envision with me if you will....the actual word LIFE,
The four letters..... L-I-F-E,

And from that word, we'll create a simple acronym....but one that could change the way we SEE LIFE.

LIFE

"L" -LOOKING "I" - INTENTLY "F" - for the FACE of Jesus "E" – EVERYWHERE

Looking Intently for the Face of Jesus Everywhere.

That will change the way we see life.

Psalm 105 (Or read from 1 chronicles 16:8-11?)

- 1 Give praise to the Lord, proclaim his name;
make known among the nations what he has done.
- 2 Sing to him, sing praise to him;
tell of all his wonderful acts.
- 3 Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.
- 4 Look to the Lord and his strength;
seek his face always.

Let's stand and sing together: Oh Lord You're beautiful/Turn Your eyes upon Jesus