

D IS FOR DELIGHT

A sermon given at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Loveland, Colorado on August 6, 2017 (Ninth Sunday after Pentecost/Communion Sunday)

Proverbs 8:22-31

Psalm 37:4-6

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In case you are visiting or haven't been in the communication loop here at this church, I am Bob von Trebra – the new Interim Pastor. Rev. Erin Gilmore left in April to become the Associate Conference Minister of our Rocky Mountain Conference of the United Church of Christ. Sara Weatherman was here for June and July. I will be with you while you search for a new pastor – a process that normally takes about one to two years. But I encourage you not to be too anxious about getting that new person. Interim times can be times of important self-discovery and growth for churches. I pray our time together will be rich and fruitful.

I understand you have been playing in the sandbox this summer. In this season after Pentecost you have been experiencing joy, flexibility, compassion, illumination, protection, renewal, trust, and dreaming. Those are all important qualities of the spiritual journey – especially for a church in a time of transition.

Today I am climbing into the sandbox with you. And our word for today is “delight.” The word “delight” means to please (someone) greatly. The origin of the word is from Latin and French, meaning “to charm.”

I am delighted to be here with you.

What delights you these days?

- (Some possibilities:
- New church-pastor relationship
- Ice Cream social
- Start of VBS
- Youth mission trip)

Our scripture readings for today suggest that delight should also be part of our relationship with God – the Holy One.

Let me begin by explaining some things about Psalm 37. If you read the entire psalm in English, it seems like a random series of wisdom sayings about trusting in God, and not getting too worked up at how wicked people sometimes seem to prosper in the short term. It isn't exactly beautiful poetry – like Psalm 23 for example. But Psalm 37 is not random – it has a beautiful pattern in the original Hebrew language that is not obvious when translated into English.

I'm sure you are all familiar with memory devices – like songs – that help us learn and remember the English alphabet. Like the song “A, B, C, D, E, F, G...” Whenever I have to remember alphabetical order (like arranging my files and books on the bookshelf), I sing that song to myself.

There are also songs that help teach spelling and phonics – like a song I found on YouTube that goes:

“A is for apple; a, a, apple. B is for ball; b, b, ball. C is for cat; c, c, cat. D is for dog; d, d, dog...”

Psalms 37 is a song to teach the Hebrew alphabet. Each phrase begins with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet (which is very different from the English alphabet). But it also tries to teach some wisdom for living while conforming to that pattern. The technical term for this kind of psalm is “acrostic” – and there are several of them in the Bible (including Psalm 119 – the longest psalm in the Bible).

If I might attempt to paraphrase the first few verses of Psalm 37 following this pattern in English, it might go something like this:

A is for anxiety. Anxiety about the success of the wicked is a waste of energy. Don't waste your time being envious of them.

B is for because. Because they will soon get their reward. They will wither and fade like the grass in a hot, dry Colorado summer.

C is for commit. Commit your trust to the Holy One, and do what is right and good; so you will live in happiness and security.

D is for delight. Delight in God, and God will satisfy the deepest longings of your heart and soul.

E is for expect. Expect God to act, if you will trust Him completely.

F is for for. For She will set things right and work out her justice as surely as the sun will rise in the morning.

D is for delight. Delight in the Lord. We all have much to be delighted about, as we have shared here this morning. We take delight in life. But how many of us take delight in our God? That isn't a term usually applied to our spiritual lives. It doesn't seem like an appropriate attitude. The Bible says in many places that we should “fear the Lord” – which really means that we should have awe and respect and reverence for God. But delight?

But Psalm 37 assures us that God is a God of justice. Long-term justice. Eternal justice. Wrongdoers will ultimately pay for how they have used and harmed others. The meek and the righteous will ultimately be blessed. This is God's wisdom. We may go through periods where

this doesn't seem to be happening (like today). But be patient; long-term patient. And trust. Delight in what God is doing; what God will do.

One of the reasons God sometimes seems slow to act is because God is patient and forgiving. This is good news – especially when we are among those who use and harm others! We may do so unknowingly. We may do so knowingly, but not care, because doing what is right can be costly, and inconvenient, and dangerous. So delight in God because God is patient with us.

And delight in God because, as the reading from Proverbs says, God's wisdom is the basis on which the world was created – the pattern. This passage from Proverbs suggests that God's wisdom is like a partner that God created as the first act of creation -- to help with the rest of the work. That personified wisdom-partner is known by the Greek word for wisdom: *Sophia*, and interestingly is feminine! Lady Wisdom. God delights in that wisdom personified. And that wisdom-partner delights in us – humankind.

This is another pleasant surprise – that the Holy One and God's *Sophia* – Lady Wisdom – would delight in us. So many times we hear religious preachers shouting that God is angry with humans – watching carefully for any wrongdoing (usually selectively defined by the preacher), and waiting to inflict punishment on us for our misdeeds – both now and into eternity. Or God is only pleased with a “chosen few” (again defined by the preacher), while the other nonbelievers are rejected and condemned. What a refreshing starting point for our relationship with God – to believe that we are a delight to Him and Her. We all tend to have our non-delightful moments in our relationship with God and other delightful human beings, and we need to work on that. But the basic starting point of our spiritual life is God's steadfast love, not God's anger. As another psalm – Psalm 30 – puts it: “God's anger is but for a moment; God's favor is for a lifetime.” (Psalm 30:5)

So let us delight in our relationship with our God – putting our trust in God's wisdom and faithfulness. Let us delight in one another, and all the neighbors we have in this world. And let us delight in this church – this sandbox – as we begin our life together, and as we feast together at the welcome table.

Amen.

Robert J. von Trebra