

Series: Words & Deeds: “They Matter”
“Flourish And Realize God’s Good Purposes”
Isaiah 44:6-8
Psalm 86:11-17
Romans 8:12-25
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Despite the threat of all that resists, opposes, and fights against God’s kingdom, God’s plan for the world will succeed. We will thrive and flourish living into God’s good purposes. And so can others!

Failure to thrive? Not here. Not now. The Spirit sets us free from the oppressive thumb of the flesh. Brenda Salter McNeil, the author of *Roadmap to Reconciliation* writes this about thriving and flourishing even in the midst of the threats, “Sharing stories is a central skill in community building...The ability to self-disclose and listen empathetically is...essential.”¹ David, encountered by the story of God’s redemptive love intersecting his story of brokenness, recounts in Psalm 86 that he wants to be taught by God, walk in God’s truth, and have his divided heart revere God’s name. David told his story of God working in his life for him to thrive and flourish.

The guinea worm is a parasite found in certain areas of central Africa. It begins its life as a larvae...in a millimeter-long crustacean. When a human drinks water from a stream, the crustacean enters the stomach where gastric juices make short work of [it]. The larvae of the guinea worm, however, are not destroyed. The worms poke holes in the...intestine and go for a swim. After about three months, the male and female larvae get together. About one year later a full-grown guinea, the width of a paper clip wire and up to three feet long, begins to move through the body...causing tremendous pain. Finally, the worm pokes out of the host’s body probably through the foot. If not removed, the parasite will eventually lead to its host’s death. Once the worm exposes itself, it can only be removed a few centimeters a day. Otherwise the worm will pull apart and die, resulting in infection and possibly death...Sometimes the painful process takes weeks or months. The guinea

¹Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 112.

worm is like sin in three important ways: First, sin is easy to get involved in. Just like drinking the water from a stream seems simple and harmless, so often does sin. Second, sin is difficult to get rid of once it has taken hold. When...we recognize it, we should act. Forgiveness comes quickly, but many times the process of getting free from [sin's] pull is slow and agonizing. Finally, like the guinea worm, sin, when left unchecked, can kill you.²

Your story and my story are similar, yet different. Each of us can disclose examples of the highs and lows of life with their accompanying exhilarations and debilitations. When we tell our stories, we can help one another understand better who we are, particularly if we have accepted the gift of Jesus the Messiah. We can help one another thrive and flourish in God's good purposes.

The theme of the lectionary texts, Isaiah 44:6-8, Psalm 86:11-17, Romans 8:12-25, and Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, is this: God's good purposes for humanity are God's constant presence, continual creative activity, and provisions made for the well-being of humanity and the planet. This is God's plan for humanity and the planet.

In Romans 8:12-25, Paul makes it clear that in Christ, we have a new identity. God gives us the ability to live in the tension between what God accomplished in Jesus' death and resurrection and the not-yet of God's complete redemption of all creation. We aren't "broken," but we are "broken." We are to live in the "now" of God's faithfulness, while waiting in the hope of God's promises. When we live in the Spirit, we can patiently endure the serious character flaws of ourselves and others, because we know that character flaws do not have the last word. When we live in the Spirit, we are grateful for our adoption into God's family. We do not choose God. God chooses us. In the Spirit, we can love what is genuine and hate what is ingenuine. As we obey the One who gathered us into his family, we can be "...patient in suffering, persevere in prayer, offer hospitality to strangers, bless those who persecute us, and perhaps hardest of all,

² Kevin Bidwell provides this story and interpretation as adapted from an article in *Men's Health* (December 1999).

‘live peaceable with all.’³ When we do these things in the midst of threats, we lean into God’s good purposes.

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43 is the capstone on today’s sermon *Big Idea* that despite the threat of all that resists, opposes, and fights against God’s kingdom, God’s plan will succeed. Leaning into God’s good purposes fulfills God’s plan for humanity and the planet to flourish. In the midst of threats, the second of seven parable about the kingdom of heaven is the admonition not to weed out the perpetrators of the threats. It is a waste of energy for the person who is a follower of Jesus. Instead, followers of Jesus are to love their enemies. Followers of Jesus appreciate that God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Mt. 5:45). You see, God desires all creatures to thrive and flourish, realizing God’s good purposes.⁴

To lean into God’s good purposes, we must experience reconciliation at many levels and on an ongoing basis. In this regard, Brenda Salter McNeil writes, “Reconciliation is an ongoing spiritual process involving forgiveness, repentance and justice that restores broken relationships and systems to reflect God’s original intention for all creation to flourish.”⁵ The gift of reconciliation is the Christian’s mission. We have great news to share with people who are stuck in brokenness. As our stories authentically intersect the stories of others, the good news has and continues to defeat the guinea worm of sin.

The good and bad weeds grow together. That is, the good and bad humans coexist together. Will all thrive and flourish? Unfortunately not. But until the final reckoning, followers of Jesus

³Blair Alison Pogue in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 3, (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 257.

⁴In the three paragraphs of textual analysis above, I have benefited from the thinking of Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty, Jana Childers, Angela Dienhart Hancock, Nick Carter, Wendy Farley, F. Scott Spencer, and Michael Pasquarello in Joel B. Green, Thomas G. Long, Luke A. Powery, Cynthia L. Rigby and Carolyn J. Sharp, editors, *Connections, Year A, Volume 3* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2019), 156-160, 160-161, 162-164, 165-167, 167-168, 169-171, and 171-172.

⁵Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation*, 22.

continue to believe that their words and deeds matter to everyone. And just perhaps someone with whom you're in authentic relationship will move from the bad to the good, because God continued to shine on their life to the point of beginning that journey with Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

The choices we make matter. The Holy Spirit gives us assurance that the choices we make for God's good purposes fulfill God's plan. Be aware of the Enemy constantly sowing seeds of weeds to choke out the wheat. Stay awake and urgent about witnessing through your words and deeds of the goodness of God in the midst of the many threats to goodness. God's people will ultimately thrive and flourish and not be throttled by weeds. Your life matters for someone today. Make it count. Amen.

*This sermon was preached on Sunday, 23 July 2023
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