

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Alive in the Spirit of God: Finding Balance”  
Rev. Dr. John Judson  
July 2, 2017

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26  
James 2:14-26

This past week I started scanning slides that Cindy and I had come across when we moved her mother to Florida this past May. There were several boxes of them and I was enjoying pictures of my bride when she was a child. As I went through them though there was one that brought back some memories for me. It was Cindy on a teeter-totter. The memories for me were of going to the park close to my grandmother to swim in the pool and play...often on the teeter-totter. Looking back, all I can say is that the teeter-totter had to be one of the world's greatest low-tech ways to keep children busy. “John, take your brother and go play on the teeter-totter.” “Sure mom” Then up-down, up-down, up-down. Times were simpler. As I grew a bit older the up-down lost its allure, until I reached a certain age. Then the teeter-totter took on a new and challenging role. That was to stand in the middle, with one foot on either side of the pivot point and see if I could balance the totter; to see if I could keep both sides in the air at the same time.

As I look back, that has become one of the ways in which I look at life...as trying to find the balance. And I know that I am not alone in this. Throughout my ministry people have queried me about how to find the balance. How to find the balance between work and family. How to find the balance between spending time with friends and with family. How to find the balance between being at church and being at other events. How to find the balance between golf...oh, actually no one has ever asked me how to find the balance between golf and anything else. But the one place where people have strived to find balance is between loving self and loving neighbor. In other words, how do I know that I am spending the right amount of my time, talent and treasure on neighbor while spending the right amount of time, talent and treasure on self. It would have been nice when Jesus, told people that the second greatest commandment was to love neighbor as self (the first being to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength), if he had laid down some clear metrics, or given us an easy to follow formula. But he didn't. The gift this morning then, of this passage from Ecclesiastes is that we are offered an image, that I think might help us find that balance.

We will start with loving self, perhaps because this one comes a bit more naturally. Though Christianity has always been accused of being a faith in which we are supposed to not love, or care for self, this is not the heart of our faith. Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is nothing better than for someone to eat and drink and find enjoyment in their work. The Gospel

of John reminds us that we are loved by and beloved of God, so if God loves us, we should love ourselves. The problem comes when that love of self, shifts the balance too far. So how do we keep that from happening. Again, Ecclesiastes offers us an image. When we are finding the balance, the writer says, God will offer us joy. In other words, when we find deep and wonderful joy, in how we use our time, talent and treasure for ourselves, then we acting appropriately. The flip side, is that when we have gone too far, we end up, as the writer puts it, gathering and heaping. Can you see the image? Gathering is a sort of greedy, I want it all for myself, and heaping is spending more time, talent and treasure on ourselves than we can possibly enjoy. Gathering and heaping are signs of self-centeredness and selfishness. They tell us that we are out of balance.

We now turn to loving neighbor. Loving neighbor, is at the heart of the scriptures from Genesis to Revelation. It can be as simple as not stealing from our neighbors, to as James puts it, “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food”, we do not simply say to them, I will pray for you, have a nice day. We supply their bodily needs. Loving neighbor, in other words means taking concrete actions to try to alleviate the suffering and need of those around us. The simple, but perhaps not overly helpful way in which we could talk about loving neighbor would be to recall Jesus’ words to the rich man, that he is to sell everything and follow Jesus. Meaning, that loving neighbor requires us to divest ourselves of everything and live as itinerant disciples...yet, remember, we are called to balance love of self and love of neighbor. To simply sell all would be to strike an imbalance; it would be gathering and heaping up, our time, talent and treasure for others, rather than for self, thus creating an imbalanced life. It is saying that you, as a beloved child of God, are not worthy of God’s love and gifts. Again then, perhaps the way to find that balance is to find the joy in loving neighbor. In other words, when we find a deep joy in meeting the physical, emotional and relational needs of others, then we are finding balance. We are keeping the self-end of the totter in balance.

One last thought about finding balance. The balance point on which we stand, is the love and grace of God; the love of God for the world and the grace of God offered to us. The balance point is the communion table because this table reminds us of how much we are loved, and how much we are to love others. This table reminds us that Jesus offered his life to make us whole and calls upon us to do the same for others. The challenge I want to offer you this morning is this, to ask yourselves, “How is my balance? How am I to find balance in my life, such that I love both self and neighbor in ways that bring me joy?”