

**A SERMON BY REV. MARTHA M. SHIVERICK**

**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**

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**You Asked For It: If We Trust in the Lord and Wait Patiently for him,  
Will We Really Get Our Heart's Desires?**

**Text: Psalm 37:1-24**

One of the "You Asked for It Sermon" topics was on Psalm 37. These you asked for it sermons are quite a challenge. Some of them are easier to do than others and the fact that members of the congregation have asked for them makes the response for the pastor that much stickier. What if you do not agree with the person who has requested the sermon? What if your sermon might not be what they were hoping to hear? So it is with great trepidation that I step lightly into this sermon. The person requesting the sermon said that they received great comfort from this psalm. And indeed the verse that was quoted, verse 4, does make a person secure. "Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." But if you read it within its context, read the other verses, the psalm can be down right scary. So hear goes...

I received a letter from Hank Anderson two weeks ago. He is doing fine and traveling with Mary and his son Tom and daughter in law who is a travel writer for magazines. In the letter he reminded me of my first church job as a supervisor of a summer employment program which employed city kids in what was their first job experience. I worked with 20 high school kids at North Presbyterian church in the morning and 20 high school kids at the public library on Sowinski and Hough in the afternoon. I was paid not through the government as the children were but through this church. My supervisor was the minister of North Presbyterian church, The Rev. Don Gordon, a whiskey drinking/cigarette smoking city pastor, who called things the way he saw them and was wonderfully opinionated. One of his pet peeves that summer that he ranted about each day was a pastor in a church down the street from North Church who was driving around town in a Rolls Royce. This neighboring pastor said he had the power to heal and for a certain amount of money would walk you into the water of his baptismal pool and pray over you. If you were too sick to come to his church, that was ok, he would take your check and carry it into the pool with him while he prayed for you.

Scam?; that was Don Gordon's assessment and Don Gordon's anger was that this man was not just praying with an "A" but also preying with an "E" on the poorest people in our community that could not afford to be shelling out the amount of money it must take to keep a pastor in a Rolls!

But the people came and many, many people shelled out money they could not afford to be giving away. So, there must have been some comfort or hope that this man was addressing that ministered to these people in their darkest hours. Perhaps all medical treatment had failed them and they had been told that there was nothing else that could save them outside of a miracle. And so it was a miracle they were searching for when

they came to the church, money in hand, ready to be prayed/preyed over by the pastor who could evoke God's healing powers.

I thought about that when I read an article that appeared in Christian Century Magazine last month. It was a story on the largest church in our country and the theology of the pastor, The Rev. Joel Osteen. His church, the Lakewood Community Church in Houston Texas has 30,000 people attending. The church has a seating capacity of 16,000 and was formerly used by the Houston Rockets. His attraction to the so many thousands of people who worship with him and buy his books is his promise of happiness. He says the Gospel promises the best life now. The secret is to enlarge your vision. You should expect people to go out of their way to help you, and then they will. If you believe this and are a positive thinking person thinking happy jovial thoughts then only happy things will come your way. To quote him, "You must discover the power of your thoughts and words. If you beat yourself up all the time, if you do not think your self worthy of divine abundance, God won't give it. God helps us, to be sure, but we must help ourselves first." Osteen says, "We must choose to be happy. You can't put it off until tomorrow or until that financial milestone is reached. You should smile a lot, and good things will come your way. You also must work hard, for God won't bless someone who is slothful, you have to be a person of excellence." Osteen's religion is based on the belief that Christianity offers the happiest life possible. "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart."

Osteen is not the first pastor to quote the psalmist in this positive outlook on life. Norman Vincent Peale built his whole theology on the power of this positive thinking. John Buchanan editor and publisher of Christian Century Magazine says we can not dismiss the whole theology of these two men. "Of course Peale's and Osteen's books are light theology. But they are also the way thousands upon thousands of people first consider the possibility that they matter to God, that whatever suffering or unhappiness they might be experiencing was not caused by God, and that God's will for them is a full and jovial life." We mainliners have always been a little reticent about saying those kinds of things. And as people turn to the Peales and the Osteens like thirsty people to water we need to search what it is theologies like this are offering that we are not. What is it about the verse in Psalm 37 that makes so many people claim it as one of their favorites? Delight your self in the lord... and you will get your heart's desires.

It's an equation for happiness. An easy theology and almost as simple as writing a check to a preacher and having him pray over you to make you healed. In our culture where we like to control things, to be the masters of our destiny, we like solutions to problems and problems that have answers. If delighting in the Lord brings about our heart's desires; if thinking good things about ourselves makes good things happen, well then, we better get thinking positively.

But what about the person who thinks positive thoughts and negative things happen to them? What about the person who writes the check to the minister and walks through the Baptismal pool and is not cured of cancer? What about the person delighting in the Lord

whose whole life falls apart? What about the poor, the downtrodden, the oppressed, the children dieing of hunger in western Africa? The list goes on and on.

And then we read past that one flowery verse. Yes some people will be getting their heart's desires but clearly others are going to be pretty bad off. Verse after verse describes how the bad are going to get their come-up-ins and the good will be living in bliss. I mean really. The bad are going to have their own swords kill them, will have their arms broken, they will be put to shame, will vanish, and be cut off from God while the righteous will be vindicated and will inherit the earth, and will be blessed and upheld by the Lord, The discomfort I feel in reading the Psalm is the negative judgment on the enemy. It reminds me of the story in 2Kings 2:23-25. It is a story about all the miracles the prophet Elisha performed. This particular account happened when some small boys jeered him as he walked by and called him baldy. It is written that Elisha cursed them in the name of the Lord and then two she-bears came out of the woods and mauled 42 of the boys. Comforting... NOT!!! I know I have said far worse things to people than calling them baldy and God knows I've even thought worse things than I've dared utter!

So my comfort level in Psalm 37 goes down quite rapidly after the one comforting verse. First of all, how do you know you are one of God's chosen and not the cursed other? I know that I am always pretty comfortable during the Prayers of Confession on Sunday mornings and feel that in my particular case the silent prayers should be a bit lengthier. Maybe I will be one of the ones to whom really nasty things will occur because of God's wrath? But then that is very contrary to our faith. We are sinners, we are not worthy of God's grace, but it is continually offered to us! And this is the REAL Good News. The Good News that will comfort us throughout our whole life!

You see we are the people of the good news. We do not need the deal making theology of Rev Osteen and the psalmist because we know that God loves us in spite of the fact that none of us measure up. As we read the psalm, and we are really honest with our selves, we know that we deserve the bad, not the good things that are promised. But in spite of that, we are loved by God. We are promised that we will never be abandoned, that God will be with us in our suffering, in our loneliness, in our pain. That is the good news that Jesus preached, the gospel of love and grace.

But I am not quickly going to discount all of Psalm 37. Look again at verses 23 and 24 of the psalm and see why these might actually be the most comforting of the verses. Let me read them again for you. "Our Steps are made firm by the Lord. Though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong, for the Lord holds us by the hand." God might not be giving me my heart's desires, might not heal the dying even though I pray that it happens or might not stop pain and suffering all over the world even though I ask for it fervently, I pray that children do not go to bed hungry or insecure at night, but it is happening all over God's creation. Some people just are not getting the desires of their hearts. But I know that God is holding all of us by the hand, that God is cradling us throughout our lives. God cares about us and loves us. And we have done nothing to earn that type of love. We need only reach out and God is there.

Easy feel good religion like the Osteens and the Peales can not be totally discounted. Even though they are a bit Cotton Candy-ish, they bring people to God. When Bo and I lived in Columbus, I worked at a church that developed a T.V. ministry. A huge portion of the church budget was used to put the Sunday services on the air across central Ohio. At the time, I had serious misgivings about whether I felt called to participate in this type of ministry. The president and owner of the TV station took me out to lunch to talk about it. His argument in support of televised religion was that it brought the unchurched to think about their relationship with God. He told me the story of a very unsavory character who had gone to the television station to thank them for saving his life. He found God through a tele-evangelist. You can not dismiss that. As John Buchanan said, "Any theology that promises success as a reward for faithfulness and fervent prayer is misleading at best, and it deserves a forceful critique. At the same time I've learned not to dismiss ministries, however different from mine, that can lead people to their vocation or to a new sense of God's love."

So, in answer to the Question of whether we will get our heart's desires if we delight in the Lord?... Yes and no. And if holding that verse close to you in times of uncertainty brings comfort to you, then it is a powerful and wonderful image and gift of God. But, I also offer you a few other verses from that psalm that can bring you greater comfort and something to hold on to in all times and places. That is the assurance that God is holding your hand. Just as the small child can hold out his or her hand with a faith and assurance that the parent will reach down and pick them up, we can live with the certainty that we might stumble but God will always be there to hold us.

"Our steps are made firm by the Lord; though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong, for the Lord holds us by the hand." Amen.

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