

Keep Working Even If You're Disappointed

A Children's Talk by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

Bryn Athyn Community Worship Service - October 23, 2022

- Let me tell you a story.
 - The Children of Israel once had a beautiful temple – a place where they could worship the Lord.
 - It was made out of stone and special wood brought all the way from another country.
 - And lots of gold!
 - If you went inside the temple, everywhere you looked you would have seen gold—from the floor to the walls to the ceiling—everything was covered in gold.
- And then the Children of Israel stopped worshipping the Lord and an enemy called the Babylonians came and attacked them and eventually destroyed that beautiful temple.
 - And the Babylonians took many of the people captive and took them far away from their home.
- Seventy years later a different ruler took over Babylon and he said that the Children of Israel could go back to their land and he even gave them money to pay for them to build a new temple – a new house of God.

- It took them a while but eventually they got to work on building a new house for the Lord.
 - And they worked on it for about a month and then they felt pretty disappointed about how the house they were building looked.
 - And so the Lord sent a prophet to them to encourage them.
 - Haggai 2:1,3
 - [T]he word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, saying: ... “Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? And how do you see it now? Is it not as if it were nothing in your eyes?”

- To understand how they felt, let's talk about Lego.
 - Isn't this a cool model?
 - Can you see what it is? (The Cathedral)
 - And there's an even cooler and bigger Lego model of the Cathedral that you can look at afterwards.
 - Let's imagine that this model got smashed.
 - How many of you have had some cool thing you built out of Lego get smashed?
 - And then picture trying to rebuild it.
 - And to make it even harder, imagine trying to rebuild it with none of the original pieces.

- That was what the Children of Israel were trying to do – rebuild a house for the Lord after the first one had been smashed and they had none of the same pieces that the first one had been built with.

- So what did the Lord say to them?
 - Did He say, "Oh well, give up. It's never going to be good enough."
 - No! This is what the Lord said through the prophet:
 - Haggai 2:4
 - "And now be strong, Zerubbabel," says the LORD; "and be strong, Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; and be strong, all you people of the land," says the LORD, "and work; for I am with you," says the LORD of hosts."
 - The Lord says, "Be strong and keep working on it because I am with you."
 - You can keep working even when you're feeling disappointed because the Lord is with you.
- And this is true for trying to be a good person too.
 - We all want to be good and kind people and we all have times where we aren't as good and kind as we would like to be.
 - It reminds me of drawing a picture.
 - Here's a picture I drew.
 - Can you see what the picture is? (The Lord's Word up there.)
 - We can be trying to make a picture of the Lord's Word in our lives.
 - You can probably see that my picture is not perfect.
 - There are plenty of places where it is not quite right.
 - And I can feel like because it's not perfect I should scrumple it up and give up.
 - The Lord says, "No. Don't scrumple up your efforts to be a good person. Be strong and keep working; I am with you."
- The Lord didn't actually care about how fancy the building was that the Children of Israel were building.
 - He cared that they were trying to follow Him and do what they were supposed to do.
 - The Lord doesn't mind if our efforts to be a good person aren't as good as they could be.
 - He says, "Be strong and keep working because I am with you."
- Amen.

Rebuilding

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith

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Introduction

- For the Children's Talk we jumped into the story in the second chapter of the book of Haggai, when work on the house of the Lord was already underway.
- Now let's go back a bit and give you a bit more context.
- The book of Ezra tells the story of the people coming back from captivity and, shortly after getting back, they have a ceremony where they lay the foundation of the temple and people are crying and others are shouting for joy (Ezra 3).
 - With the foundation laid, we might expect them to then start working on building the temple.
- But then there's conflict over who gets to be involved in the building the temple and no more work is done on it for sixteen years.
 - That would be like if the foundation had been laid in 2006 and no work had happened on it since then.
- Then the word of the Lord comes by the prophet Haggai to the people.
 - And he says to them, "You say that it's not time yet to build the Lord's house" (Haggai 1:2).
 - But, he says, "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this house to lie in ruins?" (Haggai 1:4).
 - In those sixteen years, they'd found the time to build nice houses for themselves but hadn't got around to building a house for the Lord.
- The Lord says to them, "Set your heart on your ways!" – Think about what you've been doing – "Go up to the mountain and bring wood and build the house, and I will take pleasure in it and I will be glorified" (Haggai 1:7-8).
- And, to the people's credit, they listen to the prophet.
 - The priest and the governor and all the people are motivated.
 - Haggai 1:14
 - And the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and did what was useful in the house of the LORD of hosts, their God
- It's such a beautiful picture of people being convicted by their conscience, coming together in a spirit of obedience to God to each do their part to build a house for the Lord.
 - We might wish that the story ended there.
 - But it doesn't.
 - They get to work and then, a month later, as we read in the Children's Talk, they're ready to quit because it doesn't look as good as they wish it did.

We Are All Meant to Be Temples of God

- The teachings of the New Church say that we, as individuals, can become temples of God.
- Listen to this passage:
 - *True Christianity* §374
 - According to Paul we are temples of God... The goal, intention, and objective for us as temples of God is our salvation and eternal life. Salvation and eternal life relate to our will, where our goal, intention, and objective reside. As we go along, we take in teachings about faith and charity from our parents, teachers, and preachers. When we come into our own judgment, we take in teachings about faith and charity from the Word and religious books. These are all means to an end. These means have to do with our intellect. Finally we end up being useful by following teachings as the means; this happens through the physical actions called good works. . . . This is how we become temples of God.
- Again, it's a beautiful picture.
 - We have a sincere desire to be saved by the Lord and become an angel one day.
 - And so we learn teachings from other people and eventually directly from the Word.
 - And then we live according to those teachings and do useful good works.
 - Through that process we become temples of God.
- But, just like the Children of Israel, dutifully trying to do what's useful to build a house for their God, we can sometimes be rather disappointed in the results of our labors.
 - As Haggai says to the people, "Is it not as if it were nothing in your eyes?"
- Let's look at what this experience is like for us as individuals and as a community.

Disappointment as an Individual

- As individuals it is easy to feel disappointed – disappointed in how a particular thing we were working on went, disappointed in how our lives in general have worked out so far, disappointed in ourselves and how far short of the ideal we are.
- It's particularly hard when we've put some effort in.
 - If we didn't even try, then we at least have the excuse that we weren't trying.
 - But if we tried hard and then still failed... ouch.
 - We can experience these dynamics in all different areas of our lives – in our professional life, in our personal life, in our hobbies and creative pursuits – we can feel like a failure in some or even in all of those areas of our lives.
- Let's talk about how it looks in the area of our spiritual development.
 - We might have some fuzzy memories of a time when things were better.
 - You might feel like, "When I was a kid I just believed. I just knew there was a God and I trusted that He was looking after things. And I don't seem to be able to get back to that place as an adult, no matter what I try."
 - This is like the people rebuilding the temple having fuzzy memories of how good the original temple was.

- Our meagre efforts to read the Word and follow the Lord can seem pretty poor and ineffectual or, “as nothing in our eyes.”
- Understandable though this feeling is, let’s question it a little bit.

Historical or Handed-Down Faith vs. Spiritual Faith

- Here I find teachings from the New Church about how faith develops to be really helpful, particularly teachings about what is sometimes called “historical faith” or handed-down faith.
 - This is faith or belief that has been handed down to us by other people – often our parents and other influential people in our lives whose beliefs and values we respect and want to emulate.
 - This handed-down faith is a good starting point but it’s not living or flexible or saving.
- This is how one passage explains the difference between handed-down faith and spiritual faith:
 - *Apocalypse Explained* §242:5
 - [H]anded-down faith . . . is believed because another person has said it. . . . Handed-down faith... is like a belief in things unknown. . . ; and yet spiritual faith is such that in it truths themselves are seen and are consequently believed.
- When we have handed-down faith it means that we just believe things to be true because we’ve always believed them to be true because people we know and love believe them to be true.
- If we want a real, spiritual faith that is our own, then we will need to examine and evaluate for ourselves the beliefs that have been handed down to us by other people and compare them with what the Word teaches (*Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* §59).
 - And, even more important than that, we need to try to *live* what we believe.
 - Another passage says, “Handed-down faith becomes saving in a person, when he or she learns truths from the Word, and lives according to them” (*Apocalypse Explained* §815:4).
- When we start trying to live according to our beliefs, it’s usually not going to be very pretty.
 - And we might have some unrealistic expectations for ourselves.

Unrealistic Expectations

- This is an area where I feel bad for my kids because some of them have exactly the same problem that I did as a kid.
 - It’s the feeling, “Uhhhhhhnnhh! I can’t already do this thing as well as I want to be able to do it!”
 - It doesn’t matter that I’ve just started learning how to do it; I’m frustrated and angry at myself and the world that I can’t already do it really well.
 - “Uhhhhhhnnhh! This new temple doesn’t look as good as the one my ancestors built!”
 - Never mind that the people had only been working on it for a month and that it took Solomon, with unlimited resources, seven years to build the previous temple (1 Kings 6:38).
- So maybe it’s a little bit unrealistic for us to expect ourselves to be good at implementing whatever changes we want to make in our lives, after only a couple of weeks or even a couple of years of effort.

Working with Real Life and Real People vs. Hypothetical Life and Hypothetical People

- Another challenge that comes up when we're trying to live what we believe instead of just sticking with handed-down faith is that then we end up dealing with real life and real people.
- Hypothetical life and hypothetical people are way easier to deal with.
 - I like those people.
 - Hypothetical people fit perfectly into my theories.
 - I know what to do for them and they respond to what I do exactly as I expect them to.
 - Real people in real life are far more messy and confusing.
 - It's like the difference between having *theories* about parenting and actually *being* a parent to my specific children.
 - I suddenly have much less confidence in what I'm doing; I'm way more overwhelmed; and figuring out the right thing to do is far more confusing.
 - I do not look nearly as good as an actual parent as I did as a hypothetical parent.
 - Or it's like being in high school and you see other students in student government positions or as captains of sports teams or heads of clubs and you have some thoughts about how they could do their job better.
 - If you actually get one of those positions yourself, it's a bit harder to actually do it than when it was just a theory.
- In real life, working with real people, there are lots of factors outside of our control.
 - Not least of which is the fact that people have their own free will and can make their own decisions.
 - And so we – or other people around us – can be working pretty hard to follow the Lord and live according to His Word and we can still find our lives to be not as ideal as we wish they were.
 - And that hurts.
 - It particularly hurts when we were the one who did something selfish and messed things up.
- This is a real challenge of trying to live your faith in real life but it's also part of the beauty of it.
 - The people we are caring about and trying to be in relationship with and work with are not *hypothetical* people!
 - They're *real* people!
 - They matter.
 - How I treat the people in my life and respond to them matters.
 - And how you treat the people in your life and respond to them matters.
- Maybe we can give ourselves and other people a little bit more grace when we fall short of our ideals.
 - And maybe we can listen to the prophet of the Lord when he says to us, "Be strong and keep working for I am with you."

Disappointment as a Community

- Now let's move on to talking about disappointment as a community.
- The prophet Haggai said to the people, "Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? And how do you see it now?"
 - They were feeling pretty bad about how things looked at that point in the history of their people, especially as compared with the past.

Selective Memory

- For perspective, it's useful to think back in the story to what the first temple would have been like, right before it was destroyed by the Babylonians.
 - Those few people who were old enough to have seen it before it got destroyed, were probably remembering it somewhat selectively.
 - They might have remembered it as this beautiful and pristine house of worship for Jehovah, forgetting that many evil kings had ruled over Judah and had neglected the temple and also put idols of false gods in it and had done many terrible things in worship of those false gods.
 - Those people were remembering the good parts of the old temple and not the terrible parts.
- When looking back on Bryn Athyn's history, we might have similar selective memory.
 - We might remember the full church services and forget the not-so-good things that were also going on.
 - Some things may have been better than today and some things were worse.

When Jesus Was at the Temple

- It's also useful to fast-forward in the story and think about what the temple was like when Jesus was walking around it.
 - The temple that the people in Haggai's time built was not as impressive as Solomon's temple had been.
 - But, eventually, Herod came along and took forty-six years to significantly renovate and expand the temple and its complex (John 2:20).
 - This, by the way, is the same Herod who ordered the massacre of babies in the Bethlehem area.
- So when Jesus and His disciples were going around the temple, it was this impressive structure and the disciples wanted to show Him around the buildings and they said, "Teacher, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here!" (Mark 13:1).
 - And Jesus' response is, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone shall be left upon another, that shall not be thrown down" (Mark 13:2).
 - And in another place He said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" but the text tells us that He was speaking of the temple of His body (John 2:19-21).
 - That beautiful building was meant to be "a house of prayer for all nations" but had become "a den of thieves" (Mark 11:17).

- Which temple was the best house of the Lord?
 - The one built by Solomon who eventually turned to worshipping other gods?
 - The one built by murderous, controlling Herod so that he would be remembered for his impressive building projects?
 - Or the not-so-fancy one built by people who were trying to obey what the prophet of the Lord told them to do?

“Be strong and work for I am with you.”

- There may be a time in the future of the Bryn Athyn Church when all of the church services are full to bursting again.
 - I hope so.
 - I hope we get to see it.
- But somehow, looking at the ebb and flows of the history of the temple suggests to me that our focus should not be so much on how well or badly we seem to be doing but rather on whether we are obediently following the Lord.
 - The people in Solomon’s time, who got to be alive at the pinnacle of the kingdom of Israel, were not spiritually superior to the people in Haggai’s time or the people in Herod’s time.
 - In the same way, we are people at a particular time in the history of the human race and our task is to humbly try to follow our God, regardless of how well or poorly things seem to be going for us or for the church.
 - The Lord’s message to the people who were feeling downhearted was “be strong and work; for I am with you” (Haggai 2:4).
- It’s easy to get caught up in thinking about how we are doing.
 - “Am I succeeding or failing?”
 - “Am I better than that person or worse than them?”
- It’s much cleaner to ask ourselves questions like, “Am I following the Lord?” and “Am I trying to live according to what the Lord teaches in His Word?”
 - Does the Lord want me to work on becoming a better friend to the people I care about? Yes?
 - Ok. Then I’ll work on it – regardless of how good a friend I might think I currently am, I’m going to keep working on it because I think the Lord wants me to.
 - Does the Lord want me to work on reading His Word more consistently? Yes.
 - So I’ll keep doing that, even if I am not as knowledgeable or wise as other people I know.
 - And, as a church community, does the Lord want us to be working on supporting each other in our spiritual lives and reaching out to people beyond our community? Yes?
 - Ok. So we’ll keep working on that, even when our efforts or the results of our efforts are not as good as wish they were.

Conclusion: "In this place I will give peace."

- To wrap this up I want to reflect on one last piece of what the prophet Haggai says to the disappointed people.
 - The Lord says that He's going to shake things up.
 - Kind of like an old cartoon where a bad guy who's stolen some money gets held upside down and shaken until coins come spilling out of his pockets, the Lord says that He's going to shake all nations and fill this house with glory.
 - "'The silver is Mine, and the gold is Mine,' says the LORD of hosts" (Haggai 2:8).
 - The point is that all of the success that we might want to claim credit for or the success that might seem always out of our reach or all the wisdom or knowledge or love and compassion that we might see in other people or in ourselves – all of that is actually the Lord's.
 - And *He* wants to share it with everybody.
 - If we let Him, He will fill up the puny little houses we've built with His overflowing glory.
- Then Haggai says this: "'The glory of this latter house shall be greater than the first,' says the LORD of hosts. 'And in this place I will give peace,' says the LORD of hosts" (Haggai 2:9).
 - Yes, Lord, please let it be so!
 - Give us the strength to humbly keep working, even in the face of challenges and apparent failure, so that we may experience some of Your glory.
 - But even more so, Lord, please give us peace, give us peace in this place!
- *Amen.*

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.