### “Love May Overflow” Steve Finlan for The First Church, December 8, 2024

**Philippians 1:3–6, 9–11**

3I thank my God every time I remember you . . . 5because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. 6I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. . . 9This is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight 10to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, 11having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

**Luke 3:1–6**

1In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, 2during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. 3He went into all the region round the Jordan proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, 4as it is written in the book of the prophet Isaiah, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; 6 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Do you have projects you have finished? How about projects you have not finished yet? Well, have you ever thought of God has having a project that he wants to finish? Paul speaks of God completing the work he has begun in you. What *is* that work? Is it physical? Is it spiritual? Will it be completed in this lifetime, or not?

Well, at a minimum, it has to do with growth. What does Paul say happens if you grow? He says you will be able to discern what is the best, that your love may overflow, and that you may be pure and blameless, actually producing a harvest of righteousness. Does that sound like too much? Maybe it’s more than you aspire to. “What *harvests* can I produce?” you might say. “Harvests” may seem a bit pretentious. Well, apparently you have an effect on the people around you. You will always produce a harvest of *some* kind. In that case, you’d like to make it a harvest of goodness. You want to be pure and blameless in the end. What is this harvest like? Can we get any clues from the gospel reading?

John understands that he is preparing the way for the one promised by Isaiah, one who will raise the downtrodden and take down the proud. That’s what’s meant by the metaphor of filling in valleys and making mountains low. The crooked ways made straight seems to be an obvious metaphor for putting honesty and good will in place of dishonesty and trickiness. Making rough ways smooth seems to stand for making things that were difficult easy. So it’s a story of God fixing the world, doing away with lies and barriers.

Now, we believe that the Messiah has come, but there seem to be as many lies and barriers as there have ever been. The Messiah’s life seems to be a new beginning, but humanity as a whole has not chosen to follow that pathway, yet. *Yet* is a big word here. It may be that selfish and dishonest ways will go on for many years, increasing the sorrow and suffering in their wake, leading to a time when, *eventually*, a generation will forsake the old and moldy ways and to seek to follow *God’s* ways. *Then* will all flesh see the salvation of God. *Then* love may overflow and full insight be gained.

In the meantime, before the whole world turns, we have to turn around our own personal lives. We have to get the crooked ways in our *own* lives to be made straight. We have to see the salvation of God in our *own* lives, and see that rough ways are made smooth. It’s all a matter of responsiveness and receptivity. God gives us as much spirit as we can receive.

So how can we increase our receptivity? I think that honest prayer is one method. And it’s not just *prayer*, where we’re asking for things, but *worship*, where we’re quietly appreciating God, or, as the 20th century Harvard theologian William Hocking wrote, “the discovery of an object of *effortless appreciation*” (*Meaning of God in Human Experience*, 422). It’s where we get beyond the *effort* that is involved in prayer, and reach a place of “*enjoyment*” in contemplation (*Meaning of God*, 419). Hocking says that when we subordinate to God all these lesser loves and enjoyments, we “can make these loves immortal” (421).

He goes on to say “the whole of human existence falls into two phases, work and worship; the domain of duty and the domain of love, respectively” (Hocking, *Meaning of God*, 426). So *real* worship, the passive admiration and appreciation of the Supreme, is an expression of love. Paul says this love is linked “with knowledge and full insight” (Phil 1:9).

That ends my tour of Hocking and leads me back to my discussion of how one can increase one’s spiritual receptivity. Besides effortful prayer and effortless worship, another step is to undertake spiritual study and reading. That, along with interpersonal experience, leads to insight. And finally we can foster our receptivity by seeking out loving fellowship and ways of serving others. The church can be helpful in study, fellowship, and service.

One needs to find one’s own experience of effortless admiration and passive appreciation of God, whether in church or in moments at home or in the course of daily living, even while driving. Let them happen. Think about what brings you joy, and raise these thoughts up to God so that you find joy in God.

God loves us and seeks to meet with us in our worship experience. The medieval mystic, Meister Eckhart, wrote “you need not seek Him here or there; He is no farther off than the door of the heart. There He stands and waits. . . *Your opening and His entering are but one moment*” (Underhill, *Mysticism*, 133). God *wants* to encounter us. And the English mystic Julian of Norwich wrote “Our natural will is to have God, and the Good will of God is to have us” (*Mysticism,* 133–34). And so you can live your earthly life, have your earthly loves, and also raise them up to God’s attention. As Proverbs says, “In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (Prov 3:6). God will straighten out what is crooked, and fill what is empty!