

Dr. Seuss's *Oh, the Places You'll Go* begins with these words, "Congratulations! Today is your day. You're off to Great Places! You're off and away! You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose. You're on your own. And you know what you know. And YOU are the one who'll decide where to go." My mother gave me an inscribed copy of this book when I graduated high school, and I still cherish it. Graduation is an important milestone that we celebrate as you take a more active role in writing the story of your life. My question for you graduates and for all of us to consider is, what kind of story will you tell? If you're going to tell a good story, you have to know what makes a good life.

In our Acts reading today, we witness an adventure in which the Apostle Paul decides to use the gift of his life for the benefit of others. Because life itself is a gift. Your life is a gift, given to you. You didn't choose it or create it. You were given your life, and it's good to be you. How will you use the gift of you? Our passage begins as the Apostle Paul has a dream. He sees a man from Macedonia pleading with him to come and help. Paul trusts this vision is from God and immediately sets off to discover who this person is that needs his help. For Paul **the good life is given in service of others**, but not all of us use our gift that way.

In my neighborhood, many households put up banners in their yard announcing their graduate and where they're headed next. Sometimes these banners include a quote from the graduate, and there's one in my neighborhood where below the picture is the quote, "I love the smell of dollar bills." On one level, I appreciate your honesty, but I don't think you're going to be very happy. In fairness to this young man, he's simply expressing out loud what many of us feel in private, that life is about acquisition. Life is not about giving or service. Life is about taking and possessing. We all decide what our life is going to be about, because you can't have it both ways.

In one of his least loved teachings, Jesus said you cannot serve both God and money. You will love one and hate the other. Jesus isn't shaming us, nor is he suggesting that wealth is evil, but he is trying to heal us. The truth is we become what we love, and if you love money, you will become an object. In time, you'll become less of a person, and more of a thing, and you will treat others as things. To love wealth is inherently dehumanizing, but the call to service connects us one to another, and that is where we find joy. The happiest most human people you will ever meet are those who find a way to do what they love most in service to others. That's the sweet spot. Fredrick Buechner writes, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Yeah, what makes you come alive? How can that passion meet the world's hunger? What that looks like can take infinite forms, but the life of joy is a life of service. That's the first point.

The second point is that **the good life is lived in service with others**. You may have missed this detail in our reading, but notice the voice in which it's written, "When Paul had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia." Most of Acts is written in the third person, but here it's in the first person, "We set sail from Troas." Paul did not follow his dreams alone, and neither do we. One of the great myths of our country is the so-called self-made person. We love stories of individuals who with a singular passion go on to change the world. The truth is that no one does it alone. We all need each other.

Though we idolize independence, the reality is that we are interdependent. That's how God made us. To try and live independently and not interdependently is a dehumanizing illusion. The triune God is a God of relationships, and we are created in the image of a relational

God, which means the good life is lived in relationship with others. Finding your “we” is one of the most important things you’ll ever do. The composition of the we will change over time, but there will never come a time when you will not need other people in your life. Your life is a gift, and the meaningful life is one lived both in service to others and with others. We come into this world utterly dependent on others, we grow into interdependence, and more often than not, we die in dependence to others. That’s how God made it to be. That’s my corrective for Dr. Seuss. The best story is not about the places you’ll go, but about the places we’ll go. It’s the difference between Rene Descartes’ “I think therefore I am,” and the African word *ubuntu*, which says, “I am because we are.” It’s your connection to others that makes you an “I.” There’s a uniqueness to you, but the fulness of you cannot be known in isolation but only in relationship. The good life is lived in service with others.

Thirdly, notice what happens when Paul and his we arrive in Macedonia. Let’s remember why Paul set out in the first place. He had a dream of a man pleading for help, but when they arrive, what do they find? A group of faithful women led by Lydia. **The good life remains open to the surprises of God.** When your dreams do come true, they may arrive in surprising forms, which means you need to remain open and expect to find God in unexpected people and places. Lydia is a person outside the norm. She isn’t attached to a man. She runs her own business, and she leads a household. She’s not the person Paul expected to meet in his dreams, yet she is the one who eagerly receives his message. God opens Lydia’s heart, and her entire household is baptized, and none of that would happen if Paul were not open to the surprises of God. Your life will take unexpected twists and turns. Things will not go as planned, but within those surprises look for God where you don’t expect, and God will open your heart to something better than you expected.

Finally, and most importantly is how this story ends. After Lydia and her household are baptized, she says, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.’ And she prevailed upon us.” If you have judged me to be faithful—it’s an interesting thing to say. Why would Paul judge Lydia faithful? After all, they’ve just met. Isn’t faithfulness something we earn over time? Yet Lydia seems to think she should be judged faithful now. What gives her that boldness? Perhaps Lydia understands her baptismal identity. Presbyterians believe that baptism is a sign and seal that we belong to Christ, and that cannot be undone. Baptism is the recognition that your identity as God’s beloved is not something that is voted on, nor can it be revoked. You are judged faithful, because you belong to Christ, and Christ is nothing if not faithful. **The good life is grounded in grace.**

Graduates, as you set out into the world and decide where you’ll go, you will be tempted to think that your worthiness is based on your performance. In fact, I think the biggest lie our culture tells is that what you have is what you deserve. This message is meant to inspire us in our supposed meritocracy, and perhaps it does, until it doesn’t. If you believe that what you have is what you deserve, you will always have an inherently fragile identity. Depending on your circumstances, you will either look down upon yourself or others. With this story, there’s no other way. If we believe that what we have is what we deserve, we’ll always look down to those with less, and look down upon ourselves when we have less than others. But grace firmly sets our identity in that which does not change. Grace allows us to look upon ourselves as inherently worthy of love and belonging. Grace enables you to ground your worthiness in something stronger than grades, salaries, promotions, and dollar bills. Here’s the truth,

whether you succeed or fail (and you will do both), you remain always God's beloved, and that's why you are judged faithful.

Oh, the places we'll go, when we live our life in service to others, when you find your we, when you look for God in unexpected forms, and when you know that no matter what happens, you are worthy of love and belonging because you belong to God, and nothing can take that away from you.