

“THE LIMITS THAT MAKE US”

FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC

PHILIPPIANS 4:8-13; GENESIS 2:4B-9

7 JUNE 2026

Our second text this morning comes from the book of Genesis, chapter 2, verses 4b-9. Listen for the Word of the Lord:

In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens, ⁵ when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no vegetation of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground, ⁶ but a stream would rise from the earth and water the whole face of the ground— ⁷ then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. ⁸ And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. ⁹ Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Of all the Scriptural one liners to achieve cultural ascendancy —

- *“For God so loved the world”*,
- *“Love is patient”*,
- *“In the beginning God created”*,
- *“But Jael found a tent peg and a hammer. She .. went to Sisera [who...] was sleeping. She put a tent peg to the side of [his] head and hit it with a hammer” (y’all remember that one?), and*
- *“Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess”*,

Who would have guessed that a mid-sentence affirmation written from a Roman prison cell in the closing segment of the letter to the Philippians would rise above the rest? Nestled right there in our first text for the day is the most ubiquitous Christian affirmation in American culture (do you remember it?), “I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me.”

The postgame interview after the miraculous catch. The buzzer-beating three, the perfect turn to end the race. If you’ve watched ESPN you’ve heard Philippians 4:13, but it’s not just an athletic rallying cry. Philippians 4:13 is a mantra that comforts us,

challenges us, and slides from our lips like honey. It is **both** a Christian truism *and* a contextually misunderstood call to action for achievement.

When Pierce, who is now 14, was growing up, he was told what we tell many kids: “You can do anything, you can be anything, anything is possible!” It was meant as an encouragement, a way of giving him license to find his passions and explore the wide world laid out before him. And it became a maxim “everything is possible.”

A few years ago, just as life was returning to normal after the Covid pandemic, Pierce developed a nasty one-two combination of long Covid and mono. His friends were going back to the world outside but he was laid low, with barely any energy, occasional fevers, and an acute sense of anxiety. Jen and I couldn’t do much about the fevers and fatigue, but we were attuned to the anxiety. We finally got to the bottom of what was worrying him:

possibility.

He was afraid of endless possibilities: of a new pandemic, that he would feel terribly forever, that something would go creep in the night, that the engineers behind the renewed Jurassic Park franchise would get some real scientific insight and develop an actual Jurassic Park, that anything that — good or bad — would in fact happen.

He was paralyzed by a fear that everything was possible. And when I would sit with him to try and comfort him with limits, with the reality that adults really speak (that, in fact, all things are *not* possible in the world God has carefully created) he would recall what we’d said and what scripture proclaimed:

all things, all things are possible.

Around the same time, I began engaging with a little known Dietrich Bonhoeffer text exploring the Genesis creation narratives. Bonhoeffer, a German-Christian theologian, delivered the lectures that would become *Creation and Fall* at the University of Berlin during the 1932-1933 academic year, right around the time that the Nazis consolidated power in the Reichstag. Neither Bonhoeffer’s timing nor his topic were coincidental.

Nazis paraded a worldview centered on the possibility of engineering a superior race. Through propaganda, scapegoating, technology, and force they mythologized the ideal

human: a limitless, solitary, white man whose will could be enacted on others and whose superiority was encoded in his genetics.

Unsettled by the narrative world around him, Bonhoeffer turned for clarity to the Judeo-Christian creation account. Where Nazi politicians spoke of unending potential, Bonhoeffer proclaimed creatureliness and of the very good limits that make us what we are.

For Bonhoeffer, the question of human existence is not answered by idealizing human capacity, but by interrogating God's intention in calling the world to being in the first place. In a time of deep existential crisis, faced with powerful and omnipresent narratives that devalued Jews, the differently abled, gay folks, and foreigners, Bonhoeffer had the courage to ask how the fundamental fact of our creatureliness, shared across time, place, **and** person, could draw us together in a kingdom far greater than the German state (or any other state for that matter).

Reading Bonhoeffer reminded me that we were created for something, and that despite all that would unfold in the garden and in our world, God's original intention had not been lost.

However we want to interpret the first two chapters of Genesis, its truth rings. God, in an act of sheer graciousness, molded humanity from the stuff of earth, breathed life into the human, and set him in the garden alongside a partner, a succession from which two things can be assumed. First, we were created to receive life directly from God — from the tree of life planted in the middle of the garden — and second, we were created for one another, to live in community and to work on behalf of those with whom we share life.

Hidden in the text I read this morning, often overlooked amidst conversations about creationism, gender, and literalism is a poetic, truth-filled image I can't quite shake, one that grounds everything that comes in this sermon and everything that follows in Scripture: the tree of life stands *in the middle* of the garden. The NRSVue opts to translate "middle" as "midst," but it means the same thing: God is not outside of our lives as something to be grasped or a boundary to be transgressed. God is at the center of our existence, and not only our existence, God is the center *all existence* whether we realize it or not.

That means (unfortunately for some of us) that we are neither the heart of creation nor its crown. God's gift of life is in the middle of it all, flowing to each of us equally, encompassing us, binding us, and holding us. God is our center and God is our limit. Each person we encounter receives life from the center. Regardless of ability or nationality or wealth or education. God orients us and God holds us.

Life is from God at the very center of our being, that's the first truth of shared creatureliness. The second? God limits us not only by the tether that binds us to him, but by the gift of others in our midst. The will, the needs, and the hopes of the other — no matter who they are — constricts individual possibility but in so doing allows for flourishing-in-community.

That is precisely what we see in the creation of Eve and in the story of the good Samaritan. The other is not to be overcome as an obstacle, they are to be attended to as necessary part of God's good creation.

When God creates us, God limits us. Everything is not possible when life flows from the center. A function of our life together is our dependency on that shared source, and an essential trait of God is God's generosity, both through the tree of life and by the helpers in our midst.

We were created to enjoy life from its source, to eat it up,
and receive it as a gift,
and we were created for the flourishing of all those around us,
which is to say, possibility is limited by God's intention for what we ought to be,
tethered at every moment to him, bound to the Divine at our center,
and by each other,
by the very fact of someone else,
by their needs and hopes,
which press on us in our comfort,
nag us in our selfishness,
and give us the opportunity build relationships
alongside those with whom we share the garden and bear its work.

All things are possible insofar as they share those ends.
Flourishing. Connection. Contentment. Growth.
And all of that is very good.

But if we ignore that limit, if we reach beyond God's provision and transgress the boundaries of that for which we are created, if we attempt to grasp life from any other source, we do so — as Adam will soon learn — at our own risk.

Now I know we've hit a lot of territory here — so hang with me. This is a sermon about what it means to be human, and about the difference the Christian proclamation should make our living.

When you leave worship today, I want you to go with a nagging question, the kind whose answer you can only live into. How can understanding why God called us into being help us live in a time of collapse, crisis, and conflict?

How do we fashion an ethic for everyday discipleship in 2026?

Whatever it is, whatever God is calling you to do, I can assure you that it begins with an acknowledgment of creatureliness, of vulnerability, of limitation. Each of us is valuable because we are creatures of the Creator, lovingly formed by the Triune God. Our worth does not lie in our education, our ability, our comprehension, our our possessions. It is simply in having been created.

God, in the fulness of time, saw it fit to unfurl the planets and place us in the garden. We did not need to be but we are, and that matters for how we treat one another, for the policies we enact, *for the way we share our abundance*, and for the care we take with one another.

When the German Christian church began to proclaim the superiority of one man, one race, one system, over the goodness of God, Bonhoeffer understood that the only antidote was the ancient proclamation of Scripture: we are (all of us), at our beginning and at our end, God's. We are creatures of the Creator. We are beholden to one another and to the father almighty, maker of heaven and earth. The gift of breath is a gift of dependency and limitation, and no one can alter that gift without transgressing their center, without ignoring what God has called them to be.

Pope Leo's recent encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, is as much about what it means to be human as it is a critique of unchecked technological innovation. Leo neatly articulates the way our limitations illuminate opportunities for discipleship and care and reveal discrepancies in our society: "If the human being is treated as something to be perfected or surpassed," Leo writes,

“it becomes easier to accept that some lives are less useful, less desirable or less worthy [...] Finitude, when truly accepted, does not diminish us but opens us to recognizing the face of God and others. Indeed, precisely because we experience limits — vulnerability, suffering and failure — we can recognize the inviolable dignity of every person, both our own and that of others.”

The magnificence of humanity is not technological innovation or racial and national superiority. It is not endless possibility. It is in what we share: creatureliness. It is in our center, the tree in our midst, the God who called us to being and returns us to life. The magnificence of humanity is in the way we are Christ for one another: the celebrations at a birth and weddings, the sitting in grief after a loss, the binding up of wounds, the sharing of material goods ... all those things that the early church did so well but we, in our quest for progress have lost.

From a prison cell Paul affirmed that all things are possible through Christ. He's right. But Paul isn't betting on the impossible, that he can free himself from Roman chains or come back from six behind, he's betting on the God who creates life from darkness and sustains it in our deepest cells. Paul writes from a place of contentment and trust in our peculiar God. He understands the limitations of possibility in his life and ministry. Rome's chains hold him, the state seeks his death. But he lives with Christ at his center. Paul receives life — all of it, remember that list in Philippians 4, to have little, to have plenty, to be fed, to be hungry — as a gift because he knows that in it all he is centered and bound by the God who loves him, who created him, and who holds him still.

He is connected to the tree-become-cross from which all life flows. He is connected to the God for whom all-things-but-darkness are possible, and because of that he is content in all circumstances, dependent on that center for his being.

If a limit is only at the edge of our life, it is always something that we will be tempted to transgress, to cross, to push past...whether it be God or the human being who stands in our way. There will never be enough, there will never be satisfaction. For Paul accepting limits is about learning what is truly possible — God's everlasting presence — and where one is called to tend the garden, which is the precisely work of discipleship, whether in a prison cell or in the streets of the city.

Each new time Pierce would imagine some limitless possibility — a car falls on the house or Jen and I never return home from a walk — I would remind him: not everything is possible,

But one thing is certain: God is impossibly present in and through all things.

The God who breathed you to being is with you
in life and death, in muck and mire, in joy and celebration,

the God who placed us in the garden,
limits us, holds us, and sustains us.

In turn we show up for one another in our best moments and our worst. We advocate for one another, feed one another, ensure the dignity of the other is honored.

Paul knew that, he died advocating for the rights of the folks in Philippi,
asking the church to remember them, to pour itself out for them.

Paul knew that not because he was perfect,
not because anything could happen
but because even in chains, he was held.

That is what it means to say “I can do all things through Christ.”
Not limitless possibility—
but unbreakable belonging.

How does having been created by God and set in this Garden inform what’s next?
Answer the question in your living: we are not the center. We were not created to be.

All life is from the middle. from God, the sustaining presence in the midst of it all.

You — clay, dust, breath, creature — are held,
together with each of us. And that is all the possibility we need.

—Leigh Stuckey