

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 5, 2006

Readings: I Corinthians 9: 16 – 23
Mark: 1: 29 – 39

Hymns: #73 Swiftly Pass the Clouds of Glory
#517 We Come as Guests Invited
#210 Our God Our Help in Ages Past

Galilean Spring
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There used to be a restaurant in the Bronx, maybe it was Manhattan, called Mama Leone's. It was the Italian answer to Patricia Murphy's Restaurant in Scarsdale, or was it Yonkers?

If neither of those names rings a bell, they were dining establishments that I remember into the seventies, maybe later, huge places with massive seating, geared for large family gatherings and special events.

Manero's in Greenwich was another and there were several in City Island: the Sea Shore Restaurant, Anna's Harbor Inn, and others. They were places I loved as a kid, and every now and then, I will still go out to City Island to eat and I can still hear the laughter and the voices of some of the members of my family.

Back to Mama Leone's, actually, this little tale is really more about my grandfather than about the restaurant.

For whatever reason, my dad, who was in a business that serviced restaurants, really didn't like Mama Leone's very much. I recall his thinking it was over-rated, a tourist trap, with silverware that was never going to be really clean – as long as they used soap from one of his competitors.

My grandfather, on the other hand loved the place. I've spoken about Grandpa before, you may remember. He's the one that had the set ways about him; traveling to Brooklyn for a hair cut or Arthur Avenue for his cold cuts. Well, this restaurant was on his list, and on one of the holidays, he got his way, despite my father's protestations.

All the family, aunts, uncles, cousins, all 20 or 30 of us trekked to Mama Leone's, by train or car – I'm not sure after all these years. What I do remember, though, is that when we got there, we had to wait outside for what must have been an hour.

During this whole time, my dad was getting more and more annoyed and my grandfather – well, he just got the biggest kick out of it all. I remember him laughing every time my father would complain about the whole thing being a pain – grandpa just laughed and got that twinkle in his eyes.

To tell you the truth, the food I don't remember, either! Except for the chunks of extra sharp Romano and Swiss cheeses they placed on the table as appetizers. I was about ten or eleven and I had never seen vast amounts of two of my favorite cheeses like that before. I also remember making sure I left that day with a few chunks stored in napkins for later.

I have often thought about that day and wondered what made grandpa so happy. Well, I finally figured it out in the last couple of days – thanks to a new set of grandparents: my mother and father.

I called my parents in Florida, yesterday to wish them a happy 55th wedding anniversary. In the course of our conversation, they told me that for the last couple of days they have been hosting my sister-in-law and Ella, their new granddaughter, also their first grandchild. My brother has been off to Cincinnati, making arrangements for the new family to move into their new home, following his beginning a new job. It's been quite a couple of months for them!

Anyway, my mom and dad were both on the phone as we chatted, and in the course of the conversation they started telling me more about having Ella "in the house."

They gushed about how it was the first time they've had a baby sleep in their bedroom for forty-two years and how they got hardly any sleep because she had a little gas and needed to eat in the middle of the night and to be walked when she cried and ... as they told me how they had absolutely little or no sleep the whole night ... they just laughed and laughed. In short, they were having a ball with Ella. Didn't matter what she did.

That's when it clicked, they were just happy to be with the family – just as my grandfather did. Didn't matter about the crying, complaining, bickering, dirty silverware or diapers – they were happy to be together – knowing probably that such times are really very special moments, preparing memories for a lifetime.

It was the spring of life, in a way: a time of warmth and gathering and the blossoming of things in all sorts of ways. For me, those times in the Bronx were times of enormous safety and hopefulness – not without sadness, by any means – but I, too, today can just laugh and smile as I replay the memories – my history.

These are my stories, the history, as I recall it, of my life – vignettes that have helped me gain meaning and purpose for my own time on this planet. And, they all actually took place. I don't remember the exact dates, locations, or times or how we might have gotten there – but they occurred and are part of our family's history.

A member of the Jesus Seminar, a group studying the life and works of Jesus, Bruce Chilton, once said that history is the study of the meaning of human events. I agree with that. Theology aside for a moment, history – these stories - are not so much about proving exactly what did and did not happen – but about the meaning and impact of these happenings on the lives of those who shared them.

Last week, I spent a lot of time in my sermon, trying to explain the landscape of the times into which we are heading, setting our face toward Jerusalem and Eastertide, transporting ourselves thousands of years in the past to plumb the present with a bit more understanding.

In recent weeks, we have also spoken about some of the inconsistencies in various parts of the Bible, such as two creation stories, Goliath dying twice at the hands of two different heroes, and other contradictions that occur in a text that was never meant to be taken as “minutes” of the times.

There are many questions that persist today, such as on the cover of this morning’s Journal News. In the paper there’s a very interesting article about the dilemma of the Roman Catholic Church in dealing with the concept of “Limbo,” created in the Fourth Century to address the question of what happened to infants who died without the benefit of baptism – or the placement of leaders of the faith such as Moses and Abraham – neither of whom were baptized. Certainly such innocents could never have gone to hell. Yet without baptism – how could they get to heaven? One answer to that, prior to Limbo, was Augustine’s statement that the un-baptized babies went to the least painful place in hell. That didn’t last too long.

Yet, even in the process of debunking literal and sometimes mythical claims -- used by some groups to separate, marginalize, and do violence towards others.... It is also true for me that there are certain things, many things in the Bible and Scriptures, that lead us beyond this place into the Great Mystery of which we are a part.

Nowhere, for me, is that mystery made more present than in the life and teachings of Jesus. Jesus and the things he did – really does take us beyond anything that we know or anything that has been duplicated since.

As we move into the Galilean Spring... the time of Jesus’s ministry and spreading fame, there are stories based on his unique relationship with the Spirit and God that I have no question are true and as accurate as they can be, some 2000 years later.

The miracle sheet I handed out last week, for example, the exorcism of demons of last and this week’s readings, the healings, and more... really do bring Jesus alive for me in ways that confirm this exceptional relationship with God.

I was talking with a member of the congregation after last week's service about these things in general. He said to me, "Well, I am not so much interested in whether these things happened exactly as stated or not, but it's the stories that I really like and in which I find meaning."

I thought about that comment all week long, and love the place to which it has taken me – back to the mystery – not of how did Jesus do "it" or what were the exact circumstances of the practice of these things – but, rather, what did they mean. Or better, when Jesus preached and taught about the kingdom of God – what did he mean by that for us today? What answers to meaning in our own lives do the miracles and such have for us – today?

Jesus did try to make it as clear as he could. Contrary to what many think, the parables were meant to be very clear and easy to understand explanations that Jesus used in his ministry. They were not meant to confound, by any stretch. Jesus's ministry was all about meaning: what did it mean to seek God in the way he taught us to seek; or pray in the way he taught us to pray; what did he mean – and how do we ever know when we get it right? In light of those questions, the details are permitted to fade into broader considerations, as happens with all history.

One of the commentaries I use has this to say about the passage in Mark this morning:

...when dealing honestly with what is in the passage [in the Bible] , we allow it to stimulate the imagination and conscience, as a picture and symbol of the truth extended into experience, we help it to fulfill its high function as a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path.

Meaning and light. We are seeking meaning and light.

This morning's reading about Jesus teaching and then going home – or to someone's home – and once there "practicing what he preaches," "walking the walk," as we say today. We know exactly what this means. What we do here – take it out there and home when we leave. Try and live out there in our daily lives the way we do in

here with one another. Or more simply, treating all those we meet as though we were in church – this church.

And the healing of today's passages. "He took her by the hand...and the fever left her."

How many times have we held a hand of someone who was hurting who we wished to help or heal. You know, we have. We have helped and healed in our lifetime, and each of us has such examples.

But it is also clear that Jesus did some extraordinary – some would say, supernatural – things. Thirty-four miracles documented in some sixty different ways between the three evangelists and John. That's what was on the sheet last week, Jesus was really very good at this. But whether he was better at it than us or not is not the point, I think. The point is to do what he did: take others by the hand in times of need and be there for them – help them; heal them...and let the thought of Jesus and his teachings help us to do that. There's meaning in such an approach.

On healing for a minute. I am actually very convinced that healing is a critical part of what we are called to do. As we approach to the General Assembly in Birmingham this June, I will be talking a bit more about the issues of the Assembly and the Task Force's Report on Peace, Unity, and Purity – however, let me say now that I do think we, as a denomination, will move beyond G6.0106b and its exclusionary practices toward LGBT persons.

It's for that reason that I believe we need to start considering and planning for what will follow and the need for healing. We are going to have what we have now, with a little more intensity – a fractured church – and that means that people, brothers and sisters – will need healing, just as we do now.

Even here, in this congregation of ours, we are healing from events in our own lives and the life of this church over the last few and several years. People have been exposed to any number of situations, which have been hard to navigate. Much has been resolved, some still remains; what is true, though, is that the practice of the meaning we

find in these gospels, these stories – has been the foundation for the love and unity that lives even in the tension.

It is also clear, that when you are known as a healer, they will come!

“That evening at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city gathered about the door.”

And Jesus healed them. Wondrous. Yes. But for what reason? To prove he was the Son of God; out of a deep sense of compassion; to feel the power surge through him as he did such things? Or, maybe, to get us to see what can come of faith and have us give it a try and pass it forward?

Perhaps we only come to know what it means, once we have practiced such things. If we follow Jesus’s teachings of compassion and hospitality, more will come – whole cities perhaps will gather about our doors. In no instance that I know of, did Jesus go out and promote his ministry. He simply ministered and taught, as a rabbi does – as Jesus did – and people were always there.

It may be very true, that once these things have meaning for a person or a group of people, there is a transcendence from defining what is going on in some way – and simply being a part of The Way, creating invitations to follow based on how we practice our faith.

And it was clear that Jesus prayed. “He went out into a solitary place and prayed.” Jesus relied on prayer and meditation and reflection – away from everything. He modeled it all for us; made it important and central to any ministry that would follow his teachings.

Meaning and light. My grandfather’s laugh; my parent’s glow – were from the deep place inside of them that gives meaning to their lives – so much so that it escapes all around them as luminous energy in a way I can’t explain.

The stories in the gospels are such pathways to luminous energy. Pathways to our own discovery of the meaning that exists in the life of Jesus today in our lives.

As we come to the Table this morning, surrounded by the children of our congregation, let us give some space in the absence of thinking to the meaning of this act rooted deeply in tradition and history. Let the moment and its inherent light and meaning overpower any attempt to define it. Let it be present – and allow it to be.

Meaning, often, comes from a very quiet and still place. May you find that here this morning in remembering the history of a Passover meal many years ago.

Amen