

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Third Sunday in Lent
March 19, 2006

Reflection: “We are called on not to mirror but to challenge culture, not to sustain but to upend the status quo, and if that to some sounds overly bold, isn’t it true that God is always beckoning us toward horizons we aren’t sure we want to reach?” - William Sloane Coffin

Readings: Exodus 20: 1 – 17
John 2: 13 – 22

Hymns: # 8 Lift Up Your Head, Ye Mighty Gates
#388 O Jesus, I Have Promised
#445 Great Day

“Lessons from Sunday School”
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Did you have to learn the Ten Commandments by heart when you were a child in Sunday School? I did. And I believed them. I still believe them, even though I have serious difficulty adhering to several of them. But I believe them today, just as I believed everything they taught me in Sunday School.

And therein lies one of my biggest problems. I believed everything that they taught me in Sunday School...and that belief has gotten me into trouble most of my life!

I believed the Ten Commandments were from God. I rooted for little David as he came up against Goliath because I believed what they taught me in that Methodist Sunday School in Croton-on-Hudson. I believed that good would triumph in the battle with evil.

But I also understood that if good were, in fact, to triumph over evil, I couldn’t step back and watch this scenario unfold from the perspective of a bystander. And that’s why - at least I guess that’s why - I keep “getting in trouble.” I have never believed that remaining silent or behaving passively when it came to issues of good/evil, justice/injustice, war/peace, inclusion/exclusion was acceptable.

I know that many in this church hold to the same set of values. It is risky socially, economically and politically to take stands, but we know it is right. Palisades Church has been unwilling to linger in the shadows of doubt and fear when it

comes to discipleship. Palisades Church has risked some temporary bad ink in the conservative religious press in exchange for the knowledge that God smiles kindly on folks struggling mightily to live by his word. I think many of you believed all those lessons from Sunday School, too.

But that is also why this morning's assigned Gospel text is so important for all of "us." You know "us" – the "good guys!" Standing for justice issues also puts us very much at risk of violating those first two commandments: You shall have no other gods before me, and, You shall not make for yourself an idol. I'm afraid those other gods who might be named "self-righteous" or "smug" can become all too important to us. And we need only look around this sanctuary to see in how many ways we can prepare idols...even these very idols which we construct to demonstrate to the world how important our triune God is to us.

Ann Weems is known as the Poet Laureate of the Presbyterian Church. Her prolific works have included Kneeling in Bethlehem, Kneeling in Jerusalem, Psalms of Lament, and others. In the March 6th edition of Presbyterian Outlook her poem, No other gods, speaks to both of this morning's lectionary lessons. Ann Weems looks at the furious whip-snapping Jesus overturning tables and chasing people and animals out of the Temple. She writes...

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I commend the full poem to you. In fact, Weems has published a whole Lenten lectionary based series in Presbyterian Outlook. If you go to the Outlook's website and click on 2006 Lent you can read all of her remarkable focused work, including this particular poem.

Jesus' demonstrated rage in the Temple of long ago would certainly be replicated were he to walk into any one of our churches...any one...liberal, conservative, rural clapboard or urban gothic..... for all of our other gods are so - so - evident!

In a book titled Craddock Stories, Fred Craddock wrote "I went to a dedication service of a beautiful building at the University of Oklahoma. It had a tall tower, great facilities, all kinds of marvelous thing. I was there for the dedication. And the young man, the campus minister, had a very brief prayer. "Lord burn down this building and scatter these people for the sake of the gospel."

Hear that again...Lord, burn down this building and scatter these people – for the sake of the gospel. In other words, "for the sake of the gospel" may only be realized away from this building...away from all that we hold hallowed and dear in this place we call our church home.

While we are railing against injustices and poverty and crimes against humanity we need to examine our own hearts to see where our own priorities lie...where

our own gods live and what they look like. We need to ask ourselves, "how am I going to react when Jesus comes into my life and overturns the tables?"

Our dilemma is clear. While we bask away in the laps of luxury, it is easy to pontificate about the wrongs of the world and how they play out so horribly in the lives of millions of our sisters and brothers. It is easy to throw money into the church's offering plates or stuff checks into the envelopes that come with the unending charitable appeals that appear in our mailboxes. It is easy to jump into the political forays and fight for what we know is right. It's just plain easy to give! And it's so easy - to say nothing of personally rewarding - to know deep in our hearts that we are on the "right" side of political and religious issues. So easy! So arrogant, eh?

So! Let's see how we feel when Jesus comes after us with his whip of cords. Let's start right here in the chancel. Let's open the doors and start throwing things out into the street. Out goes this pulpit! Out goes the organ - and the organist with it! Out goes the cross, and the Bible, and the baptismal font. Bye-Bye Choir! OK, now we're getting somewhere. Move into the sanctuary. Who will knock out the windows...careful now...watch the flying glass. Pulling the pews out of the flooring will be kind of tough...but let's do it! Let's tear this place down! Burn it!

"Don't be so silly," you say? Well, perhaps.....but if we were to do this, how would we feel? I would suggest that we would be despairing, while at the same time furious. And then would come determination...determination to darned well build it up again! After all, this is our church, isn't it?

Well, no, it isn't. It is concrete and wood and shingles and fabric and glass. It is all of this "stuff" and all of this "space" that is so sacred to us.

You shall not build yourself an idol before me!

Our imagined destruction and determination to rebuild reflect just how easily we build those idols. Ann Weems continues in her poem...

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It occurs to me that if, in fact, the lessons we learned in Sunday School were integrated into the beings we have become, our strength comes from our insistence to be the Church...not this structure, but the Church of Jesus Christ the Troublemaker. It occurs to me that there are human sensitivities born of the Holy Spirit which, if we are willing to experience without having to control, will pull us together as the body of Christ, moving into the world with courage. If we admit to our adoration of power and wealth and self-comforts we have taken the first step towards walking humbly with our Lord.

Awhile ago I read President Jimmy Carter's most recent book, *Our Endangered Values, America's Moral Crisis*. I told Ray I would loan it to him and have it with me to leave in his office this morning. While one wouldn't expect one of Carter's books to be devoid of politics, it is a startling statement on the growing effects of the political influence of the so-called Christian Right not only in our own country but around the world.

What is particularly striking is that Carter writes as a lifelong card-carrying, Sunday school teaching Southern Baptist...and one with status that has allowed him personal witness to the political influence of a group of very wealthy, very self-centered, very conservative southern men. What is striking is that seeing the exponential growth of the control exercised by this group that Carter was forced to leave his own denomination. It has forced him to speak out from the obviously powerful platform on which he rests. But speak he has!

In a book replete with startling statistics on arrogant actions and abuse of the environment, international relations, the role of women, sexuality, human rights, privacy, military power, and more, nothing rises up as more dramatic than the widening gap between the rich and the poor of our own nation. Carter writes, "Under the tax cuts pushed through Congress since 2000, for every dollar in reductions for a middle-class family, the top 1 percent of household will receive \$54, and those with \$1 million or more in income will benefit by \$191! During the first three years [of the tax cuts]! The number of Americans living in poverty increased by 3.5 million, while the income for the four hundred wealthiest Americans jumped by 10 percent just in the year 2002. Another indication of the growing division between rich and poor in recent years is that the salaries of corporate chief executive officers have gone from forty times to four hundred times the average worker's pay. Even though there was strong growth in corporate profits, wages for the average worker fell in 2004, after adjusting for inflation."

Well, there's nothing new here, is there...except the numbers themselves. Some folks will shake their heads and wonder to themselves "what is going on in this world?" Others will grumble to their families and closest friends and resign themselves to being powerless in the face of powerful greed and corruption. You know...you can't fight City Hall! Some others will speak out...some will run for office...some will write editorials...some will lead marches. I wonder which ones Jesus would join?

Were those old Sunday School stories just that...stories? Was the prophet Micah just a dreamer when he said that what God requires of us - everything that he requires - is to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with him? Was Jesus just a wandering hippie of his time, sporting his love beads, sandals and peace sign when he said that the first and greatest commandment was to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and

then that the second commandment is like the first...You shall love your neighbor as yourself?

If those are just comforting words to us then we will sit in our temples and lift up all of our traditional customs and be glad in it. If, instead, they are foundation - "key" - stones of our faith, we will go into the world as commanded and preach the gospel through our actions as well as our words.

Jimmy Carter's epilogue to his book posits the question, what is a superpower?" He writes, "What are some of the other attributes of a superpower? Once again, they might very well mirror those of a person. These would include a demonstrable commitment to truth, justice, peace, freedom, humility, human rights, generosity, and the upholding of other moral values."

That one will preach, Brother!

Amen.

Harriet Sandmeier