

Palisades Presbyterian Church  
Fifth Sunday in Lent  
April 2, 2006

Reflection: "Sit quietly, doing nothing, spring comes, and the grass grows by itself." - Zen saying.

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Readings: Psalm 51: 1 - 12  
John 12: 20 - 33

Hymns: #298 There's a Wideness in God's Mercy  
#513 Let Us Break Bread Together on Our Knees  
#369 I'm Gonna Live So God Can Use Me

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Loosening the Grip  
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In the foreword to A New and Right Spirit<sup>1</sup>, by Rick Barger, Mark Allan Powell of Trinity Lutheran Seminary, in Columbus, Ohio has this to say:

Before I was a theology professor, I was a theology student. In 1973 I was a junior at Texas Lutheran College and participated in a class discussion on Paul Tillich. To help us connect to one of the writer's favorite phrases, the students leading our discussion asked each of us to write down what we considered to be our "ultimate concern." Then we shared what we had written and why.

Some people had single sentence summaries of a spiritual goal:  
"My ultimate concern in this life is to go to heaven and live with God in the next."

"My ultimate concern is to be true to myself as an authentic human being."

Some people identified a primary objective or cause:

"My ultimate concern is to be a witness to the gospel of Christ."

"My ultimate concern is to work for justice and peace in all the earth."

I honestly don't remember what I wrote, says Powell. I do remember that there was a freshman in the class who had written only one word: "God."

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<sup>1</sup> Barger, Rick. A New and Right Spirit. The Alban Institute, Herndon, Virginia, 2005.

I also remember that everyone laughed when he said his answer. He was the only freshman in the class and he had not studied as much theology as the rest of us. We told him that God can't be your ultimate concern because *God* isn't something you do or think or say. "Oh," he said. He hadn't understood the assignment.

Thirty years later, I'd like to go on record as saying the freshman got it right. Faith, ministry, Christianity, the church...it is really about God. It's *all* about God – it's not about us, not about what we believe or do or think or say, not about the causes to which we commit ourselves or the rituals in which we partake or the doctrines that we profess.

It is ultimately about God, and to be more specific, it is ultimately about the risen Lord Jesus Christ through whom God comes to us, providing us with goals and causes that may be vital and important but are not ultimate.

The God who breaks into our lives on Easter morning is both object and subject of our ultimate concern. Everything changed on Easter morning. Something ultimate happened and the church is (no more or less) the result. The mission of the church is simply to be the result of what God did on Easter. No more no less.

Easter has its pre and post period, and liturgically we are still in the pre-Easter period, so let's begin there, with Psalm 51 in the "pre-" period. Psalm 51, like most of the other Psalms is attributed to King David. Whether it was written by him or about him is debatable, however it is *ultimately* about God.

Do you remember the story about David, mighty king who fell in love with Bathsheba and sent her husband, Uriah, a military leader – into the forefront of battle so that he would surely be killed and Bathsheba could become his Queen? Remember, too, Nathan the prophet, who tricked David into condemning himself for his actions by asking the king what he they should do about a commoner who had had another's husband killed so that he could take his wife? David's reply was to punish the man. Nathan, in his one dramatic role, points to David and says, "You are that man!"

Well, Psalm 51 tells of David's lament for doing such a thing. However, it also changes the dynamics a bit from the other psalms. In this poetry, it becomes clear that to do something against another is to sin against God. In one fell swoop, the psalmist writes away the separation between royalty, commoner, and God. In all cases, it is about God that the lowly, the mighty, and all in between are inclined and to whom they must address themselves and their lives.

It is a beautiful piece of literature, one that that points to the sin-sick soul when separation from God has been the outcome of one's actions, and the resultant asking for the joy of salvation, since no soul can live truly detached from God.

The psalm breaks other ground in verses 13 – 17, which are not a part of this morning's lectionary. Here are those lines:

Then I will teach transgressors thy ways, and sinners will return to thee.  
Deliver me from death, O, God, thou God of my salvation, and my tongue  
will sing aloud of thy deliverance. O lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth  
shall show forth thy praise. For thou has no delight in sacrifice; were I to  
give a burnt offering, thou wouldst not be pleased. The sacrifice  
acceptable to God is a broken spirit;

All other Psalms end with sacrifice and lament, instead, this Psalm ends with the acknowledgment that what God wants most from us is to know that we have fallen away, somehow, and that we want to return and in so doing will bring the witness of deliverance from soul-sickness, broken spirits, and contrite hearts to all who will hear and see us.

For those of you who will go home and check this out to see if the psalm really ends this way, you will find two verses added that indeed call for sacrifice – believed to have been added by some nervous priestly types who were worried about folks suddenly giving up their rituals, and such. To let go of such things would surely cause chaos and the skies to fall.

Despite the redaction, the psalm is about the opposite of gripping tightly traditions that are more limitations on who and what God is and will and will not accept. It is about letting go of practices that are distant shadows of the light of the truth in the heart, the one that burns unlike any other when we know we have fallen away from God, however we know God. It is about the voice of the light and the light of the voice that is the language of the heart. It is that deep knowing that says, "Let go. Be still, let go, and know I am your God." That is the ultimate concern, I think. Do we know God in this way or as an adjunct to our daily lives? It's not easy to do, at least not for me, but we practice – together and in our most quiet of moments alone.

As a chaplain, I learned that when folks are most challenged, most afraid, that even some of those with the broadest of world and theological views will revert back to their fundamental training, back, in some cases, all the way to the literalism of their early childhood. The gripping of safe and simpler times is an understandable reaction when faced, up front and personal, with such unknowns.

Yet, the psalmist takes us to a different place, a place that says there are no easy cures for soul-sickness, other than witness and service to God. It is ultimately about God, not a formula, not a practice, not the most magnificent of services – but a true heart, a contrite heart, and even a broken spirit that

instinctively turns to God for wholeness. In the process, however it happens, the weight is lifted, the sense of oneness with God as someone we trust seems to emerge, and a calming presence in different forms of thought, warmth, or just general well-being and acceptance fills us with peacefulness, even in the midst of great and troubling uncertainty – because we know God. Not God will do this or that, just that we know God.

As a community, we have been through such a process. There is always a sort of soul-sickness, sadness, even a sorrow when the relationship with a minister or series of ministers ends and a congregation buffets the changing winds of such things. The congregation goes through changes and shifts that can be very unsettling and divisive. The instinctual reaction is to try and fix things, and there is much that can be done – but then there is a whole other piece that suddenly becomes very apparent, it is about God and doing all we can and then letting go and trusting. When I came here that's who I met and with whom I worship today, a community that knows that the ultimate coalescing presence is God – or this would just be another social club. God as love is what exceeded all things in the recent journey of this family and it will continue to take us all – further than we ever might under our own power.

It is a truth embraced here a very deep and sacred level.

It's all a form of prayer, however we may do it – and we are not alone in praying in such ways.

Jesus did this all the time and he does it again in this morning's New Testament reading. In the synoptics, these are the verses where Jesus – suffering greatly with the imminent danger that is ahead, asks that this cup be lifted if it be God's will. John changes it a bit and has Jesus saying, "Now my soul is troubled." Jesus' soul is troubled. That deserves some quiet meditation in itself.

A troubled, sick soul seeking the ultimate concern – God - that takes Jesus to Calvary and changes everything. In one way or another, the world has entered into that tension of his life intersected with the divine in the symbol of the cross by which we remember such things to this day.

You might say, "Some Good News this is!" But it is. I really enjoy the arrival of the Greeks in this morning's readings that Sally read. They come to Andrew and Philip and say they would like to meet with Jesus. When Andrew and Philip go to Jesus to tell him of the visitors, Jesus seems to receive the news as confirmation that the Word is spreading beyond his small circle of followers and sufferers – even he is not alone; he, too, can now let go and know that God and the Spirit are – simply are. Whatever he needed to face, he would be able to accept because he saw in this small occurrence a sign of something much greater. I wonder if he said something to himself like, "OK, I get it. You'll take care of the rest from here..."

The small occurrences that are so easy to miss; the indications that God is; the act of worship embodied in being together and relying on the great truth we share and carry with us all our days. What an awesome God, as you know God, we serve – without even really knowing God's name – so by whatever name you call God – consider it just fine here.

And, if you find yourself unsure about coming to this table, just let it go, join us, and know that you are welcome here in the spirit of the gentle hospitality and wildly inclusive love of God.

God.

Amen.

May there always be work for your hands to do.  
May your purse always hold a coin or two.  
May the sun always shine upon your window pane.  
May a rainbow be certain to follow each rain.  
May the hand of a friend always be near to you and  
May God fill your heart with gladness to cheer you.