

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Fourth Sunday of Easter
May 7, 2006

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

Readings: Acts 4:5-12
1 John 3:16-24

Hymns: Hymn # 341 Blessed Assurance, Jesus is Mine
Anthem Come to the Table of the Lord
Hymn # 516 Lord, We Have Come at Your Own Invitation
Hymn #106 Alleluia, Alleluia! Give Thanks

Sanctuary
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Since the earliest of records, the members of the Jewish faith, some would say race, have been marginalized and persecuted. It would be too simple and inaccurate to say that the troubles of the Jews began in Jerusalem around 30 CE, with the execution of Jesus. Some have blamed the Jews for Jesus' death, when in truth, it is more accurate to say that Jesus' execution was about power and domination, not about race or even a particular faith.

That's important for me to say this morning as part of the broader context of my comments, but also as a specific reference this morning's readings of Acts 4:5-12.

In the readings, Peter and the prisoners were not blaming the Jews for Jesus' death, but challenging the dominant power of the times (in the hands of the Jewish leaders – the high priests – the Sanhedrin.) It would be wrong to say that these few in power represented the entire Jewish faith any more than to say that a wayward Senator represented the behavior of the people who identified from his or her state.

No, this was about the rapid rise of followers of Jesus, thought harmless fanatics until their numbers became large – still only somewhere between 1,000 – 5,000 at this time. Peter and John and others got into trouble the way a large gathering of individuals might if the power to contain any kind of an outbreak was in danger of being threatened. This was the first century, and potential uprisings were prevented by early intervention – just as was true of Jesus and the challenges he was beginning to present. He, like Peter and John, were only significant to the authorities in that they were troublesome bordering on becoming real problems – it was best to just remove them – one way or the other.

Above all else, these ascendant leaders of the religion did not want the Roman authorities to have to come in and resolve their problems, usurping their power. Think of local police agencies when State or Federal law enforcement moves in to take over a situation. It would be like that.

Peter, John, and other disciples were stirring things up by constantly talking about Jesus as the Messiah. The John referred to in these writings is John the apostle, the last living person – it is believed – to have seen Jesus alive.

As the remaining apostles and their prophecy became more popular and attractive -- so did their nuisance value. Luke, the writer of Acts, says that Peter and others were arrested for teaching false doctrine. The Sadducees probably would not have done so, being tolerant of such things to a fault, however this claim suited Luke's needs better to have been arrested – or warned as some think actually happened – for being accused of false doctrine over the resurrection of Jesus than for disturbing the peace, which is actually more likely.

So, historically and critically, there is no basis for reading into these remarks fodder for anti-Semitic sentiment or actions. The fact that those so inclined will use these passages to do so, is not surprising to us, but important to remember.

I do find the content of these verses relevant to modern or post-modern Christianity, in that we are in all ways in this world, residents, global citizens in a constant struggle of who has the power and who doesn't. Every conflict around us is about the distribution of dominance vs. the subjugation of those being dominated. The world is saturated with the entrails of such design, slowly atrophying the voices of those who can be marginalized by those who find themselves in a position to assure their power and ascendancy. It is not very different from the court of Peter and John, in some ways. They received a warning, cease and desist or else – sanctions, UN resolutions, intervention...you get the idea.

I picked up the NY Times this morning to see if I could easily identify in print evidence of this power imbalance in our times Here's what I found from the first page:

- For the Democratic party, the road back to power begins here in Ohio (from a front page article: "Early Intensity Underlines Role of Races in Ohio")
- John R. Burgess makes for an improbable courtier [attendant at the hands of the sovereign] – courtier of presidents, or a citizen who might become one. Article: "Rubbing Shoulders with Trouble and Presidents."

- In an article entitled “A Long Legacy of Frustration at CIA Helm”: With few exceptions, each of the 18 directors of central intelligence has resigned in frustration, given *his* walking papers by the president or been pressured out of the agency’s headquarters seven miles up the Potomac from the White House.
- New victims arrived every day, blindfolded and terrified. The kidnapers would shove them into the small room where Isaam Mofak Jassem sat on a concrete floor awaiting his fate. “Kidnapped in Iraq: Victim’s Tale of Clockwork Death and Ransom.”
- A tumble down Egyptian village in northern Sinai, where a centuries old Bedouin culture has been marginalized and impoverished, has become a cauldron of Islamic rage. “A Cauldron of Rage.”
- Not to mention the stunning photo of Mount Merapi’s power spewing fire and lava into the Indonesian night like some early god or monster in a Macedonian creation epic.

It wasn’t until page 10 that Darfur appeared; the struggle of Gypsies in Hungary for access to housing, water, education (page 14); clashes by thousands against globalization in Anthems – page 14, as well; and on page 24 “Border Arrests Rise as U.S. Debates Immigration Issue,” and on the bottom of that page “Colorado is set to become a bruising and confusing battleground over marriage and same-sex unions this year, with up to four conflicting proposals competing for a spot on the November ballot.”

Trickle power throughout – one group, one region, one sacred commitment against another. Where, if anywhere, is real resolution to any of this. I found no mention of Katrina, homelessness, or 911 in the first section. I did a quick read, but I saw no mention God there either. Might have been there; if it was, I missed it.

These stories and those missing aside, the he point is that we live in the give and take of this power and the proof of that is everywhere. These power struggles have become so pervasive that we don’t notice their vituperative impact on our lives until something, somewhere – somehow breaks out of the center of gravity of control gravity and becomes so obvious – so egregious that we cannot ignore it.

We live in a world that seeks power. I find myself seeking it in very subtle ways sometimes, without even thinking twice about it. Then I have to catch myself and take a look at what I’m doing and why.

Power and those who have it – like the Sanhedrin – do not want it to be messed with, so any time an attempt at a shift is made – subtle or otherwise – you can expect a push back stronger than the push forward. In some ways, our church is once again there in that tension – and there are those of us who are “messing things up” in the eyes of many – and the response, as expected, is growing.

Over the last several weeks, since the publication of the Theological Task Force Report on Peace Unity and Purity in the Church, the preparation and intensity for our General Assembly in Birmingham, Alabama has steadily increased. There are many issues before the General Assembly, ordination standards again being a major topic, especially since the Theological Task Force has made this conflict in the church a major focus of its five year study.

For those last five years, 20 Presbyterians – one of them gay – have studied, read, prayed, and done much work to try and come up with recommendations that would help this church resolve the inherent power-imbalance when it comes to ordaining openly LGBT folks to ordination.

For the last 27 years, this church has been embroiled in one way or another over whether or not LGBT people should be welcomed to the full work and worship of this church, including ordination. Instead of moving forward, through a series of events, the church has actually become more stalwart, introducing statements and guidelines (in the form of Definitive Guidance and Amendments) that today make it exceptionally difficult for LGBT folks to be ordained, and once ordained – to be at great risk in any number of ways.

Recently, a friend of mine who has been a minister for twenty years was told that she was as good a candidate for a full-time pastor position as any of those applying, but that she would not be hired because they couldn't deal with the fact that her family was made up of her lover and their combined five children.

We wouldn't do that here, but you are one of the exceptions.

And there is more. Charges, today, are being brought against several gay ministers in one way or another, and even my ordination is not beyond the reach of those who might wish to purge the church of an openly gay person who has been ordained.

What many had hoped for in the Task Force was a clear directive that g-6.0106b, the fidelity and chastity amendment, be removed from the Book of Order. Were that to have been endorsed by Covenant Network (a major design influence of the Task Force) in a very large and involved way, such a directive would have had a huge impact on this church becoming a beacon for the truly radically hospitable and wildly inclusive love that many of us believe dominated Jesus' ministry.

A ministry, by the way, that become too dangerous to allow to continue, because it disrupted the status quo too much. Jesus' constant reminders that his authority did not come from such power is always an assuring thing for me to remember.

We have become a bit more sophisticated since the first century, in some ways, but for many of us the TF report and its recommendation of #6a, that there be a two-year hold on any overtures or recommendations relative to ordination standards while we practice the use of G-6.0108 is unacceptable. G-6.0108 is the scrupling component of the Constitution which says that a candidate for ministry can be called, even if they take a position of conscience against a part of the Book of Order, as long as that part is not an essential tenet of the reformed faith. The Task Force, Covnet and others recommend passage of this report in its entirety, using the two years as a season of discernment. The hope is that such definitive guidance and authoritative interpretation at GA will give those presbyteries hesitatnt to use scrupling – the nudge to allow it. Of course, GA could always rewrite the recommendations, even saying that scrupling cannot be used in such a way.

It gets very involved, and dominant power likes that. It keeps things confusing and people off guard, and difficult to galvanize.

There are many people who feel that this report and its recommendations is a good thing: a few people will get through, we'll get more gay people ordained, and this can be the beginning of change. Others of us see this as another way that the dominant powers maintain their authority, allowing a few to appease the larger body, giving them a sense of some progress – if undefined – feeling good about what has been done in this way to right an injustice. In the meantime, there are others who feel that G-6.0106b – the fidelity and chastity amendment is what needs to be removed and that passing a report that slows down such efforts -- while giving us permission to use what is already available to be used – is an example of how dominance defeats those who seek change: they divide the change agents among themselves.

A great deal of our wrangling over the last two days has been about how we will position ourselves in our statement as That All may Freely Serve. The pressure on all groups to come into line behind the Task Force Report is very strong. In an interesting juxtaposition, those who oppose its passage, find themselves aligned with those who have done everything in their power to keep LGBT people from being ordained. They see the report as “local option,” which mean let each presbytery make its own decisions about whom it calls. This, to them and others, breaks down the fabric of a connectional church in a way that misinterprets scripture and trashes the constitutions.

This has been my life for a while now. The truth is that after my call here, as with my friend and others, there may be no work for openly gay ministers – other than exceptionally few churches like Palisades. It may be that following my role as overture advocate addressing the committee on Church Orders and Ministry as an openly gay minister, ordained in a process affirmed my right by conscience to not abide by G-6.0106b – that both the presbytery and I may find ourselves the target of challenges and charges to questioning the right to make such a decision and conduct my ordination.

The point is, well, that part of the role of a minister is to inform the congregation about polity issues. But, more, I think, is that probably every one of us has these areas (some of us more than a few) that force us out into places where power structures immediately respond in ways highly tuned to get us back into line. Each of us, besides dealing with our own voices and advocacy in areas of importance – do not live in a vacuum, and we can clearly see local, national, and global evidence of all these things and more – and just to survive, we push them away a bit – to page ten, 14, or not the first or any section of the times of our mind and lives.

Along with managing day to day living, all of this can become totally overwhelming, discouraging, divisive, feeding a low grade malaise that slows us down, keeping us from making too much noise, too much trouble, or raising too much help.

Phooey.

That's where this place, this sanctuary, and others like it come in. Here, we are reminded that the real power is not of this world at all. Here, we are reminded that the tomb is empty, Jesus' spirit is not held captive anywhere by any power or principality. Here, we affirm the truth that we do, we exist, we are who we are by the authority of Jesus and/or of God, however you may know her. Here, is where we don't deny all the turmoil, but we surpass it with an exercise of faith in community and service to one another. Jesus was a servant, not a sovereign. I have come to learn that the most feared aspects of our own incarnation are a dedication to love, as in the love of God, and truth, as in the love of God.

With that as our motivator and our method, we carry the Good News of the Gospel, that whatever this life may bring, whatever the actions of others, whatever the conditions – we are not of this world anyway; the time we have here is temporary; and we know that. So, we spend this time in service, however we may do that, practicing the Love that Jesus has taught us to practice.

I have learned what he meant when he said turn the other cheek. It means not that I allow myself to be physically mauled without protecting myself, but it means that I can meet hatred, despair, confusion, and more with love – without having to strike out at those things in kind. I don't get that message anywhere else the way I do here in the company of you, in worship, in prayer, in song, in communion.

1 John 3:16 from this morning's readings:

"We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." Does that mean we should be ready to die for one another? Well, yes, but chances are that very few of us are going to be asked to do that. However, all of us have been asked at one time or another to lay down those things we held onto, to let go, in order to follow what we thought was right, even, sometimes at great risk. That is love. There is no Christianity without risk, and no risk without love. It is that giving of one's life to God that we affirm here, in this sanctuary, serving one another and being led by the Spirit.

It is in the call to this table this morning that we remember such love, risk, and servant hood of the One we follow. These are the remembrances of the teachings of love, the agape or love feast accompanied by the Eucharist – here in this sanctuary.

You are all invited to this table and to love, regardless of from where you have come or to where it is you are going. Join with us in the celebration of more than we see, from a place of power more than any of us knows.

Amen.