

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Trinity Sunday
June 11, 2006

Reflection: “Whether one believes in a religion or not, and whether one believes in rebirth or not, there isn't anyone who doesn't appreciate kindness and compassion.” Dalai Lama

Readings: Ezekiel 37: 1 – 14
Acts 2: 1 – 21

Hymns: Hymn #138 *Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord, God Almighty*
Anthem *No, Not One - by Beverly Cleary*
Hymn #481 *Praise the Lord God's Glories Show*
Hymn #464 *Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee!*

Living into Life
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On Thursday evening, I will be leaving for the 217th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church(USA), in Birmingham, Alabama. If you have time this week, I would suggest that you visit the pcusa.org website and take a look at some of the information that is there, pertaining to the gathering.

In one section of the material put forth by the church, it explains the GA as follows:

The General Assembly consists of commissioners elected by presbyteries. Half of the commissioners will be Ministers of Word and Sacrament, half will be elders. Few will ever have been commissioners to the General Assembly before, but most will have served in one of the other governing bodies of our church: the session, which provides care and oversight of a local congregation; the presbytery, which provides care and oversight of a group of congregations; or the synod which provides care and oversight of several presbyteries.

It reviews the work of synods, resolves controversies in the church, is responsible for matters of common concern for the whole church, and serves as a symbol of unity for the church.

The General Assembly has several specific responsibilities outlined in Chapter 13 of the Book of Order. The assembly seeks to protect our church from errors in faith and practice, is responsible for assuring that the expression of our theology remains true to the biblical standards in our historic confessions. The General Assembly presents a witness for truth and justice in our community and in the world community. It sets priorities for the church and establishes relationships with other churches or ecumenical bodies.

There's more, but this gives you a flavor of what will be happening. One of the large controversies has to do with ordination standards – specifically for people who are LGBT. Others run the gamut from how to invest or divest holdings in different companies based upon their human rights issues -- to addressing the important topic of self-injury, especially among teens. It is an amazing experience to be a part of the GA; it gives one the sense that there is something you can do to help further the great hope many of us have for the members and friends of this church.

It is that same hope that I felt present yesterday at my first Palisades Presbyterian Church Strawberry Festival. What a wonderful outpouring of energy and skill in pulling it all together, and what a wonderful outcome. More than once, I heard the comment that it was a very special outreach into the community for the Palisades Presbyterian Church and how great it was to see everyone together. And, indeed, it was. Yesterday gave proof to what I have heard over and over from many of you and I believe myself: There are people who may not often enter this sanctuary, but they nonetheless consider this *their* church.

There were guests, visitors, extended family members, and an assortment of friendly and engaging pets – all of whom were here because at the core of the values of this church, there is a belief that something happens when you come from a place that is of God and you open your home and your arms and your places of worship to one another - in a radically and generously hospitable way. Something happens - that something -- I think -- is Spirit.

When I got home last night, I listened to a podcast (a downloadable audio file available on the Internet) called *The History of Doubt*” from NPR and Speaking of Faith. In it, historian Jennifer Michael Hecht discusses the importance of doubt throughout history. In one of the segments, she talks about the Cynic movement and its founder the Greek philosopher Diogenes of Sinope (c. 404-323 B.C.E.). Part of what he did was to seek to understand the material composition of the world and reasoned that the primary essence of the universe was air. As I listened to the following, I kept thinking of Spirit. Here is Diogenes from around 325 B.C.E.

And my view is that that which has intelligence is what men call air, and that all things have their course steered by it and that it has power over all things. For this very thing I hold to be a God and to reach everywhere and to dispose everything and to be in everything. And there is not anything which does not partake in it. Yet no single thing partakes in it, just in the same way as another. But there are many modes both of air and of intelligence, for it undergoes many transformations. Warmer and colder, drier and moister, more stable and in swifter motion, and it has many other differentiations in it and an infinite number of colors and sabers.

The more I thought about it, the more I understood Diogenes’ exultation about air!

Why not? Think of all that air brings to us and then add to that the third person of the Trinity – the Holy Spirit. Think of it in terms of a gathering of thousands seeking to guide this church over the next couple of weeks and its presence among those gathered; think of it in terms of a Strawberry Festival and the Spirit that flowed through the open doors and over the cedar shake shingles; think of it here, now, as we snuggle up to one another on a little more brisk June morning than we might otherwise expect.

And think of it as we all placed our hands upon Fred, feeling the flow of air, the Spirit, Ruah!

Sure Diogenes, why not? And of the intelligence in the air? I wonder if that wasn't part of what the writer of his morning's story is telling us in the reading about Jesus and Nicodemus.

I am always a little surprised that Nicodemus didn't grasp the idea of being born from above the first time Jesus said it. Contrary to the modern day interpretation of the Pharisees of Jesus' time, the image of the Pharisee in early Jewish thought was not primarily one of self-righteous hypocrisy, rather the Pharisee represented piety and holiness and the very mention of a Pharisee evoked an image of righteousness. Jesus, it is thought, had a good relationship with the Pharisees and would have learned and taught with them.

So finding Jesus with Nicodemus or in the company of Pharisees is not all that surprising. The author of this morning's readings, though, does make a point that Jesus has moved beyond them: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

Yet when Jesus tells him that to see the kingdom or the reign of God, one must be reborn from above, Nicodemus' is lost.

To further make his point, Jesus uses the same air as Diogenes as an example, when he reminds Nicodemus that he breathes the air and don't know where it comes from; he hears it and it blow has no idea its direction or will. Yet it is accepted without question. So, why expect to know – or to need to know – how the Spirit works to rely upon it? True to Jewish teachings, Jesus reinforces the practice of belief – rather than the understanding of how God works.

Logiically, then, If you believe that the wind will be here for you to breathe, why not believe too that the Spirit from which the wind comes is with you also? Jesus might have said that life is the Spirit and living into that Spirit, as we live into the wind on this planet, is living into life of the universe and beyond– with all its twists and turns.

An interesting aside is that Diogenes was the first to declare himself a citizen of the cosmos, giving impetus to the term: cosmopolitan. It seems the Spirit is inescapable throughout time, and I think that is very good news for us.

The General Assembly is sure to have some of those twists and turns, especially around the Theological Task Force Report and how it might reshape the face of the polity and procedures in this church. We'll have a broad discussion afer the assembly, and I do encourage you to follow the proceedings with whatever time you might have.

Whether at such an assembly or elsewhere, I do believe that if we can make space for the Spirit, as we do here, without even thinking of trying to contain it, and more often than not getting energized and sometimes carried to new heights by it – if we can just keep modeling that here and in our lives and gatherings, with others who do the same or seek that same, -- well, if we do that – I don't think we have to understand all that much, just live into the Spirit as we know and learn how, believing that we are cared for in our love and caring for one another – and that no matter what happens, we are going to be just fine – inside the four walls of the church or in its backyard with shortcake, strawberries, balloons, and fresh-cut flowers, or out there in the cosmos – we'll be just fine.

Ruah! Amen.