

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 25, 2006

Reflection: "What can we gain by sailing to the moon if we are not able to cross the abyss that separates us from ourselves? This is the most important of all voyages of discovery, and without it, all the rest are not only useless, but disastrous..." - Thomas Merton

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

Hymns: Hymn #469 *Morning Has Broken*
Hymn #294 *Wherever I May Wander*
Hymn #537 *Shalom, Chaverim! Farewell Good Friends*

We Love You But...
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I think it is interesting that the pastoral letter you have in front of you from the Moderator and Stated Clerk of the 217th General Assembly starts out by referring to today's lectionary using Psalm 133: "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live in unity." Considering that the unity of the General Assembly is always made up of a majority and a minority vote in all of the outcomes, it might have been more apropos and realistic to refer to Mark's part in today's readings, maybe the verse: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" rather than Psalm 133. Therein lies one of the differences in the vessel of this church we share today.

Considering that everyone leaves the General Assembly pleased in some ways and concerned in others – the question "Why are you still afraid" could be asked of almost all who attended, watched, or are affected by the process.

When I was growing up and attending Catholic masses, the priest would now and then read a letter from the bishop. I can remember the tone of the priest telling the assembled that the bishop had written *us*, and it carried the weight of great importance. I rarely understood what the bishop was talking about, but I sensed it must be pretty big or he or she, oops sorry – he, would not have interrupted the priest's sermon (most of those I never remembered, either).

So, when we were asked to distribute this morning's letter to the congregations, it brought up that imagery, and is reminiscent in some ways of the distance that exists in any hierarchical system between its corporate directives and its proximity to the people and the reality of their day-to-day struggle. Clearly, the institutional unity of the Presbyterian Church was one of the primary goals of this assembly, as it should be. The question for me is whether such unity can be

constitutionally assured or does real unity emerge out of a rejuvenation of a faith that transcends fear, even in a storm? Or better yet, is it real unity that seeks out the storms...

With 178 or so presbyteries, 11,000 congregations, and 2.4 million folk who call themselves Presbyterians, it is a little difficult to galvanize everyone around any cause or objective. Much like our own national government, which was based upon the same polity as the Presbyterian/ Anglican church, it is those who represent these churches and faithful who make the decisions which affect the entire body, some of which are decided at GA and some of which are sent out to the presbyteries for a vote.

The blessing and the challenge for this church; the hope is in the ability to change its ways, the challenge is in the inherent resistance of any institution to change.

If we seek a common denominator in all those who are part of this church, it would likely be the same as within any other church – something called faith and belief – always in direct opposition to fear. This is one of the reasons for our creeds, so that we have a common agreement and language upon which to agree and act. However, the limitations of language to capture the language and intent and heart of God that moves through us all – is always insufficient, and for that reason our constitution has provisions that allow for disagreement and individual responses to the Spirit. That is, at least, until the outer limits of the church's boundaries are tested, especially in a public way, in a way that threatens the unity or the perception of that unity. Once that happens, something else will happen, and there will be a vote at some point and one side will "win" and the other will "lose." Yet, I wonder if that is true....

In the boat in this morning's story, I love the fact that Jesus is asleep at the stern of the boat – not the bow. It is in the stern that the rudder would lie and the steering would take place. It is not the action of Jesus that steers, it is his presence. It's a wonderful image of just being in the presence of God as being enough to assure safe passage.

The narrative tells us that the boat is caught in a storm that must have been on its way when Jesus said, "Let us go to the other side." Again, this is vintage Jesus, never veering away from any storm – setting his face on Jerusalem in so many different ways throughout the gospels.

We're told that the disciples were frightened enough to finally wake Jesus (probably wondering how he could be sleeping in the first place). And, what a question they asked, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

So, as was his way, he calmed the storm and then asked them what they were worried about? Hadn't they seen enough to believe? But they hadn't, yet, for the

last question of this morning's reading has them wondering, who is this guy that the wind and sea obey him?

And, that is Mark's point in this first of four narratives about Jesus and the miracles they describe: this is the Son of God. This is Jesus the Christ, who even the wind and sea obey. Have faith, believe in him, and move with him where he leads you. You will always be safe, if you do.

The theme is recurrent, the replacement of fear with faith – and it is a powerful theme. It is what I hope would one day become our mantra, rather than the vagueness and quasi-nationalistic overtones in the idea of unity. The disciples and Jesus were one in the boat, together, in that there was unity – not in agreement, but in being together, being present in the best ways they could.

I am always struck at General Assembly by the simple truth that everyone there believes in Jesus, has faith in him and his teachings, and are doing their best to be faithful. All of us are together, united in the faith – if from different places. In other words, it's somehow working right in front of our nose, without chasing anyone out of the church. Why can't we see it?

Mark teaches us that we need to be together and work to eliminate the fear that somehow something terrible is going to happen to us if we venture onto the high seas of life, into the storms of our society, reaching out to those in need, speaking out when it is called for.

And, while I spent most of my time in committee work surrounding ordination issues, it is the same of the work involved with women's rights, the Iraq war, divestment of holdings that profit from oppression and the unintentional anti-semitism it spawns, health issues, and much, much more.

In every one of these situations there are voices heard and voices held quiet. Mark tells us, I think, that this is not what it's about. This is not a story or a gospel of acquiescence, submission, or timidity. It is a gospel that tells us over and over that we don't have to worry if we have faith. Face the storm, accept our human limitations, and then take the risks, the leaps of faith, and be as true as we can to whom God has made us to be and to what our hearts are calling us to do. Any system that thwarts that, especially a church, needs to change. And, in all humility, I say – we need to change.

If I have any meaningful observations around the General Assembly, it is probably this: too little risk.

While the perception of the outcome on the Task Force on ordination issues, for example, is that something amazing has happened, the reality is that no constitutional changes were made, and as you can see from the letter of the Moderator and Stated Clerk, this is good news for many. The "historical

standards for ordination” were not altered. “Praise God,” say many, as if the constitution were some sort of an idol. So what did happen?

What happened was that the years of preparation by the task force and days of debate at the assembly simply affirmed that candidates for ministry and leadership for office could use the constitution to claim a scruple, an objection based on conscience, to G-6.0106b, the amendment which calls for all leaders of the church to be practicing fidelity in marriage or chastity in singleness. If it did anything, the assembly by accepting the perfection of a substitute motion on part of the report added language that requires that all constitutional guidelines be followed in any proceedings relative to examination or judicial hearings. In effect, it said “Use the constitution, but keep it tight.”

The problem is obvious: anyone who is not married and living in an intimate relationship is still subject to exclusion from church leadership. While this applies in many cases to people other than LGBT, it is still targeted at keeping all but chaste people who are LGBT from serving the church as leaders, since the constitution also defines marriage as being between one man and one woman.

Over and over at the assembly, I heard we heard words, “We love you, but....”

We hate your sin...

if you want to serve, repent from being who you are...

if you want to serve, live a celibate life...

if you want to serve, change who you are....

why don't you go to another church...

But, but, but....

In the end, there will be some presbyteries who now feel it is “safe” to allow candidates to proceed in their process using G-6.0108 – the scrupling clause. The great middle of the church has quieted the storm for the majority and will be pleased with test cases and a slow, difficult (more difficult than others) path to ordination.

Many people are absolutely sure that this is a good thing, and I hope and pray that it is. I will stay in the boat working through whatever storms there are to help all people on their journey, the best I can – working with others to continue to change the oppressive systems that continue to challenge marginalized groups.

But, as I happily leave this assembly and joyously re-enter the real world of this congregation and our work and lives together, seeking God's will and practicing the teachings of Jesus –

The question of the assembly, for me, at least will remain -

“Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?”