

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 2, 2006

Reflection: "Compassion will cure more sins than condemnation."
Henry Ward Beecher

Readings: Psalm 130: 1-8; Mark 5: 23 - 43

Hymns:	Hymn #341	Blessed Assurance
	Hymn #516	Lord, We Have Come at Your Invitation
	Hymn #515	Go With Us Lord

In the Meantime
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I know sin. Along with Puffed Rice, Ding! Dong! School on TV, tricycles, box carts, roller skates and lost skate keys, stickball, Spaldings, and day after day of grammar school – I was brought up on sin, or should I say the avoidance of sin.

I can remember the struggle between "being good" and "being bad." It seemed I could never quite see "bad" coming, often finding myself in some kind of trouble before I knew how I got there. As for "good," well, you were never supposed to think of yourself as being "good," because if you did it was showing off, which also was bad. So bad was bad, knowing you were good was bad, so you had to be good without ever really knowing that you were – translation: do your best to just stay out of trouble and everything would be all right.

Actually, I internalized all this as meaning that you should try to do good, without seeking reward – but it was ok if someone noticed on their own.

Being clever and egocentric as I could and can be, this sort of internalized thinking short-circuited my memory, to the point where those years of grammar school really do seem like the same day over and over for eight years. It set up a sort of calculated forgetfulness, not devoid of motives. It was what I would later come to discover a rich and fertile ground of a pre-denial stage. Was it an early defensive adaptation toward things I could not understand or did not wish to see when I was young? I have no way of knowing.

But in that quasi-void of conscious awareness, I did pay attention to sin: original sin, venial sin, and the worst of all – mortal sin: that is a sin that was committed with a clear knowledge of its guilt, with full consent of the will, and concerning a grave matter. Damnation was to be avoided at all costs. Confession was the balm.

And, I was a regular in those small “kneelatoriums” trying, but not really, not to listen to the person going first on the other side of the priest and sliding doors that separated us. Small windows made of wood and heavily curtained metal meshed screens – windows that rumbled opened and closed on their uneven tracks, usually thudding at either end, making me forget what I was planning to say – or happy to get out of there as fast as I could.

Secrecy, sin, confession, penance, forgiveness, good, bad, eternal joy or eternal fires: that’s what I knew. No one spoke of anything but this World A version of religion, expecting me to discover the truth about this as I did about the “birds and the bees” – on my own.

There was such guilt set upon me that it is easy to see why I had to eventually rebel or die. The burden of it, for me, especially discovering my own truths – were contrary to what I had expected and how I had expected “religion” to unfold, the discrepancies between the teachings and the realities were confounding – yet, the teachings were so strong, that I ultimately came to the twisted conclusion that since I was unable to be “good,” I would just have to accept the fact that I was “bad” and accept the consequences of eternal damnation. I had someone accepted the guilty judgment of God, rather than the loving presence of God and the beauty and inherent goodness of all God’s creation.

So I knew the psalmist’s first verse well enough that even today it stops me in my tracks:

“Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.”

The word for depths is actually a reference to the *tehom*, the ancient Hebrew word for the deep waters, the primordial, engulfing waters of Sheol, to which the dead sink to everlasting damnation.

I have felt that great heaviness, that feeling of being lost from God, as if the abyss of the universe and creation were between me and God; God, with whom I so wanted to be in harmony.

We all know this loneliness, at one time or another. I can still feel its tow now and then. Yet, I have come to see “sin” as something different than that which I was first taught.

Remember the line in *South Pacific*: “You have to be taught to hate? Well, I was taught sin in such a doctrinal way that it had its own form of idolatry attached to it. By the time I first heard the definition of sin as “missing the mark or falling short of God” I was strangely pleased.

As I thought about it, it occurred to me, well, of course, that would be true. No matter what I might do, there would always be distance between me and God, since I am not God in that sense.

Of God, yes – God – no.

So distance in its most rudimentary of concepts made sense. The idea of overcoming sin as moving closer to God, made sense. The welcoming of God in forgiveness to always try again, made sense. The patience, compassion, love, and grace of God in all people and things – even in me began to make sense. The idea that I could see these things in myself without committing a sin of pride suddenly became clearly a possibility. Something that could have been taught from the start arrived too long after it was due, too long after the misconceptions and pain that it caused. Too long after, multiplied by all those to whom it had done the same thing. Nonetheless, it is as meant to be, and I am grateful the good news eventually got through to me.

I understood now the psalmist's agony, distance, shortcomings – not in terms of original sin, venial or mortal – but in terms of longing for God. I understood the desire to be complete in God. I finally embraced what I had always expected: that it was never possible to have life without God. God's presence was not up to me. It was and is always and in all ways.

These and other thoughts and knowings slowly emerged. A little here and there, ups and downs, highs and lows, and lately more moderate in between – have led me to a place where my own convictions of God are what I know best, and I am consciously aware more and more that the touch of God is everywhere.

Mark's readings this morning continue the miracle stories of Jesus, begun last week. I so love the woman who moves through the throng, the dusty, disorderly, shifting crowd about Jesus, focusing ever so intently on his cloak, keeping track of it, never taking her eyes off its frayed and swaying form, reaching, reaching, with building anticipation and expectation, finally, weaving her arm, a finger through enough to touch!

It must have been like a finger into a live socket. The power of faith and the source of faith meeting in her. She felt it. Jesus knew it. Everyone else around responded to his query of who touched him, with chiding and laughter, "Jesus, whattya mean who touched ya! Look around, everyone in this crowd is touching you and one another. C'mon Master, lighten up."

Then she caught his gaze and he hers. All those around him, with him, eating with him, traveling with him, they didn't get it but this woman – only knowing of him – did. "Woman, how I love your faith and you. That is what has healed you. Go, with peace."

Touch. It is the way we connect with one another and the Spirit. Sometimes it is superficial. At other times, it has the power of silencing any words to describe it. Everyone here has touched and been touched by one another and by the beauty of a symphony, a meal, a garden, or being with one another during times of transition and loss. That touch is what bridges the gap, the hamartia or distance between God and us. It is a touch in everyone and everything that is never exclusive of God, we just either don't see it or perhaps, feel impelled to deny it.

Jairus and his daughter. Another wonderful story of faith and risk-taking, for this official of the temple. What I think is one of the very many remarkable things about this story is that Jesus didn't need to go with Jairus to heal his daughter. He could have said, as he had in other situations, "Go, Jairus. Your daughter lives."

Did he agree to go with Jairus, so that along the way news of her death could come and his power and glory of God would be greater by raising someone who had died – in the end? I don't think so, since he instructs Jairus and his family to tell no one of what had happened.

The chaplain in me says that what Jesus did was to walk with Jairus, to be with him in his pain, to be present for him as he trudged the distance home, wondering about his daughter, his family, his life, why this had happened, what would follow...

Did Jesus know that Jairus – Jairus needed his touch, more that the daughter Jesus knew would be well?

You will find such answers for yourself in such things, but what is obvious is that Jesus healed by touch – directly or through the composition of time and space.

What is clear, too, at least to me - is that in neither situation did he ask for a statement of faith, confession, or penance before he healed. The act of asking for help, forgiveness of the distance through faith – was enough, even a tentative, expectant, motive-oriented faith was enough. After all, we are human, imperfect, and at a distance from being God. God, Jesus, understand such things.

Neither we nor our faith can be perfect, and it would seem that this is very good news, indeed.

When I was in one of my last classes at seminary, prophetic ministry, we had to write weekly five page papers on such things atonement, forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, miracles, faith, and sin.

The sin one was a toughie for me. I remember going to the professor, Dale Irvin, and saying, "Dale, I can't do this. To find God in my life I have had to reject everything I ever knew about sin. It was used to tell me I was going to hell, I was

twisted, an aberration, a sinner waiting to be punished. I can't do it. I don't believe in such things. I can't write about sin."

He wisely asked me where I found the presence of God. I sort of cocked my head like a puppy trying to figure out a new sound, and I told him. He said, so write about that. I said, OK, figuring I had gotten an alternative assignment. When in fact I was writing about the very thing sin referred to: The distance between us and the presence of God.

Dale had given me a gift that touched me with his grace and wisdom in a way that confirmed what I knew all along, God could never, ever not be with us.

And so, this morning, we touch each other and God in an intimate way of Communion with God and one another. The bread and wine, our sharing this meal of cosmic sorts with the fruit of the vine and the field narrows the gap greatly, pushing the distance out as the presence of God rushes in. Yes, we know sin – but we also know presence. We feel the wind, the Ruah. We know the Shekinah, the glittering, ubiquitous presence.

And until the sin, the distance between God and each of us has been eternally removed, until that time, how good it is to be with one another. Don't you think?

Amen.