

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Twentieth-third Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 10, 2006

Reflection:

When the power of love overcomes the love of power the world will know
peace. - Jimi Hendrix (1942 - 1970 C.E.)

Justice in the life and conduct of the State is possible only as first it resides
in the hearts and souls of the citizens. - Plato (428 - 347 B.C.E.)

Readings: Song of Solomon 2: 8 - 13
Mark 7: 1 – 8, 14 – 15, 21 - 23

Hymns:	Hymn #1	Come Thou Long Awaited Jesus
	Hymn #473	For the Beauty of the Earth
	Hymn #535	Go With Us, Lord

Show Your Face, Please
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Many of you have heard me say that I am never quite sure about how these comments I make each week go over. While I like to think that what I have to say is received well, it is very easy to slide over a line from being prepared and still and prayerful and letting the words come from some “other” place – or thinking that it might just be me.

No question, I bring me to it, but I – like you – am more than just me. There is an integrity to this process when there is less of me in the picture and more of the God I rely upon. It’s a trust thing. It’s falling back, so to speak into a place that you trust will guide you toward God’s will and words.

It’s sort of the spiritual equivalent to some of the trust-building stuff we used to do in high school in the sixties.

Let me show you.

Well, when I can do that spiritually, things seem to come together.

It is humbling to realize that I am more of who I am, when I am less of me.

And when that happens, to tell you the truth, then it becomes fun. It is truly fun to just be who you are, transparent, showing your face – or what the Greeks referred to as “partiality.”

A few days ago, I started reading a book called Piano by James Barron. Barron is a staff reporter for *The New York Times*, and in this work he follows the story of the building of one Steinway piano, from raw lumber to finished product. It’s a fascinating process and he opens his introduction with these words:

Eight-eight keys, two hundred and forty-some strings, a few pedals, and a case about the size of – yes – a bathtub: every piano (Steinway) has pretty much the same curves outside and the same workings under the lid. But the biography of a piano is the story of many stories. It is the story of fragile instruments from which all pianos are descended.

It’s easy, rewarding, welcoming to think of life here, in this congregation, buoyed and enriched by music. It is easy to understand that our prayers and worship and songs descend – from a long procession of those who have come before us. Each day, each week we add to that procession, carrying forward what has come before. It is a procession about courage and faith and trust -- and about fragility in so many ways. Just as the pianos of a heritage reflect the craftsmanship of many – we, “modern or post-modern” Christians reflect the timeless teachings of what Jesus taught – and of what he had been taught and followed in his life.

Or so it would seem to me on this nearly fall morning. And on this morning, the readings that Jim blessed us with cause me to focus on two aspects:

Where it is we have come from and how it is we learn to go forward, bringing with us our traditions as well as our innovations.

Some things, after all do need to be changed: In the piano world, for example, substitute material for ivory keys; in religion – ways to integrate archaeological and scholarly discoveries and understandings, as well as discerning the active voice of God that is with each of us – always – calling us to ever greater realms of hospitality and ecclesia – that is a people charged to be more than who they are of themselves.

You might be surprised to know that the writings of James are actually considered to be a Jewish work rather than a Christian work. Yet, that probably isn’t surprising at all when you think about it. It wasn’t until the second century CE that the followers of Jesus were first called Christians, most likely in Antioch, according to Acts 11:26.

Clearly, though our foundation was and is Jewish, as was Jesus'. Remember Matthew, 5: 17-20: [Jesus speaking]

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."

Often misunderstood, most scholars today feel that Jesus was saying, simply,

"You have gotten so far away from what your faith has taught you that what you are practicing today is way off target. Unrecognizable! The Jewish traditions of Moses and the prophets, the teachings of hospitality and faithfulness, the law of liberty – that is: the freedom to follow the will of God - have all been twisted into self-serving; ingratiating practices that are – unrecognizable! I will not follow these ways and nor should you, if you wish to be faithful." [My words]

Listen to James from this morning's readings, once again:

My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Later he says: You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

It seems, again at least to me, that the faith which originates in Jesus Christ, originated long before Jesus' ministry began. The traditions of his teachings were the traditions of the Jews. The royal law that is the uncontested law: "Love your neighbors as yourself" – preceded and was followed by Jesus – as is it followed by us, today.

And, there's more of the "old law" that Jesus did not come to abolish in James's writings:

So speak and so act as those who are to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment will be without mercy to anyone who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

Mercy triumphs over judgment.

Mercy: compassionate or kindly forbearance shown toward an offender, an enemy, or other person in one's power; compassion, pity, or benevolence.

Now, there's enough to upset a litigious society and those in power, in some settings. Yet, the more I think about it the more it seems that this "litigious" state of things has always been, certainly through the Old or First Testament and surely in the lifetime of Jesus. After all, his execution followed the process of litigation.

This is not to say that behaviors are without consequences. But, it does make one consider how, as Christians, anyone can be forgotten. If this is truly a faith that disavows distinctions, as I believe it does, living this life has its challenges – and takes practice, at least for me.

And, in some ways I think it was a very difficult thing for Jesus, from time to time.

That leads us to Mark's readings. Many people refer to the passage about the Syrophenician woman and her daughter as being terribly difficult because, well, Jesus was pretty rude to her:

She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her,

I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Let the children (the Israelites) be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs (people, such as you)."

This is pretty harsh stuff and there are several interpretations of how it might be softened a bit, from referring to the colloquial phrases of the times "dogs" a bit differently than we might interpret it today; to the meaning of "lost sheep" – perhaps including all people not of the house of Israel; to a sort of bantering that was popular in the day, a jocularity that is evidenced in these words.

Yet, most of these explanations are far-reaches, and in the end – until she begged for the life of her daughter more than once, she was denied. Doesn't sound like the Jesus we know.

And this is exactly why this is one of my very favorite narratives in all of scripture.

For most of us, there are critical points in our life when things happen that cause us to change.

I think that is part of what happened here to Jesus.

Somewhere in this exchange, Jesus's heart was changed. Suddenly, he realized that his ministry was not, in fact, just for the Jews, but it was for all in a way that transcended even what he may have thought he was called to do and to believe.

Following this event in Matthew and shortly afterwards in Mark, Jesus shows compassion on a large gathering that had come to learn from him – a crowd the disciples want to send home – since it is late and there is no food to feed them.

Jesus' words are the same in Matthew 15: 32 and Mark 8: 1

“He called his disciples and said:

I have compassion for the crowd, for they have been with me for three days and have nothing to eat, and I do not want to send them away hungry.”

From no crumbs for the Syrophoenician woman to feeding thousands of Jews and non-Jews alike. – compassion, mercy, the fragility of life, the long traditions carried forward, ever more embracingly – deepening in mystical and real ways their meanings and demonstrations...For me, here, Jesus' ministry takes a major turn away from all forms of discrimination.

Maybe, maybe what we have lost is this Royal law – a law of no distinction in a time when everyone seems to be seeking a distinction of one sort of another.

There is another section in Piano that explains the laminating process and how the piano gets its distinctive curve and shape. The Steinway, in many ways, is known by that shape, even so -- there is no avoiding the intricacies of each work that create differences and nuances from one piano to the next – personality, they call it: its tonal quality, feel, touch, and more.

We, as Christians, are known by our basic shape, by the royal law of the ancient forebears: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” We come with our differences, sometimes feeling bound more by fragility than strength, but we are bound to a faith, a faith to which ***we call ourselves***, a faith and a practice to make a difference and to grow – without distinctions to all others.

It's not about changing people, no, it's about being who we are – and allowing the Holy Spirit to do the rest.

Today, who we are a welcome back people a celebrating people. We are shortly off to be with one another for a party out of the generosity of Marjorie and the hands of many. When we get there, we will share food, and laughter, and stories. I have heard some of those stories of summer from you: all in one way or another – touching, poignant, humorous – lingering – and there are many more to be heard.

I hope you will share those journeys today with one another, listening to others as we assemble – the ecclesia – those called out to make a difference, with the enormous hearts of this congregation and its friends – full of love, compassion, and energy!

And as we listen and share, I'll leave you with this thought:

If Jesus could grow to be seen to be more like God and God seem more like Jesus – well, then let the same be true of us.

This blessing I wish upon you all.

Amen.