

Palisades Presbyterian Church

Twentieth-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 17, 2006

Reflection:

We need to find God, and [God] cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature - trees, flowers, grass - grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence... We need silence to be able to touch souls. – Mother Teresa

Readings: Proverbs 1: 30 – 33

Mark 8: 27 – 38

Hymns:	Hymn #461	God is Here
	Hymn #345	Dear Lord and Father of Mankind
	Hymn #522	Lord When I Came Into This Life

Whispered in the Sounds of Silence

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Have you ever thought of Christianity as an enlightened tradition?

We talk or know of the Enlightenment of the 18th Century, as well as other enlightened periods or movements, such as Hermeticism, Philosophy, Platonism, Alchemy, Gnosticism, Illuminism, Esotericism, and Sufism. We know of masters and other enlightened leaders of these and other regions', beliefs, or practices.

But what about Christianity and Jesus? An enlightened religion? An enlightened leader?

According to accepted definitions, an enlightened leader is a role model generally in harmony with their community.

That must be it. That must be where the disconnect with Christianity and Jesus comes in.

Within a small group, at least in the beginning – Jesus was a role model and there was harmony, but we know how that changed over the course of his ministry.

And, maybe that's why the word "harmony" to describe Jesus – just seems too simple, too incomplete. It's easier to think of him as a radical, revolutionary, protagonist. "Harmony" does not seem to describe or encompass the violence and abandonment he would suffer at the hands of many around him.

I can see harmony and being enlightened going together, but it's more than that. Let's see if we can untangle some of this web I unevenly weave.

Looking back over some of our readings from the last few weeks, we have seen Jesus as a symbol of just how much the culture of the religious practices of the times had been diverted from the original teachings of the Tanakh. Far from being enlightened as a group, many of the leaders of the faith epitomized eccentricity of power gone awry and self-serving behaviors.

Just how true this was can be seen in the response by the leaders to the challenge of Jesus' call to return to the Law of Moses. It was enough of a stir of the pot to ultimately cost him Jesus life.

It seems the road to "harmony," which is always part of a return trip – is not the easiest thing to accomplish. And it may be that an enlightened leader is also one who points the way to such a place. This comes a little closer to Jesus and the sacrifices he was willing to make to lead others home, to a place of peace and harmony beyond all understanding.

When I turn the kaleidoscope in this fashion, it seems reasonable – even accurate – to say that Jesus was an enlightened leader, transcendent in his harmony; those who follow him seeking the great promise of eternity – are actually en route to a community not of this world – but a community, nonetheless. Harmony in the ultimate community beyond the limits of humanity – getting a little closer too enlightened, I would say.

It might also be reasonable to segue from this place of enlightenment to wisdom and this morning's reading from Proverbs, which is part of the Wisdom literature of Israel, a genre that includes Job, Ecclesiastes, and some of the Psalms. This was part of a vast body of writings that existed throughout the Near East during Ancient times and known across broad boundaries: both philosophical and geographical.

And, of course, wisdom literature would have its wise men (and women). Listen to this excerpt from the Interpreters Bible on the topic of "The Wise Men."

"The cultural life of Israel was molded by three groups of leaders: the prophets, the priests and the wise men. Of these, the prophets and priests were by far the more prominent, since Israel's history was written from both a priestly and a prophetic point of view. Although the wise men did not occupy as prominent a place in the life of Israel as did the other leaders, their popular style and genial manners attracted a large number of followers among the common people. They did not speak with the authority of the prophet, "Thus saith the Lord," or with the piety of the priest; they were simply earnest seekers of the good life, and it was their aim to teach their disciples what the good life was." (p. 769)

Given, too, the tendency of Hebrew writers to personify abstract ideas and concepts, we find wisdom being referred to as a person in the feminine form, as indicated by the title of today's readings: "Wisdom publicly proclaims a warning against neglecting her appeal."

In this section of the readings, Wisdom is telling the assembled of the day to listen to what she has to say or pay the price. And she is not speaking from high in some ivory tower; she is on the streets with her calls and warnings:

"wisdom crieth aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice"

And, she talks of the noise...

"scoffers (noise-makers) delighting in their scoffing"

I went to a wedding yesterday, and it was a lovely affair, but the noise and the lights never stopped, the video screens, the MC calling for “screaming,” the endless loud music that prevented any kind of a conversation with anyone more than a foot away. I thought to myself – we can’t go an instant without any distractions to somehow keep our intellect occupied, lest our heart would be troubled or touched. What are we so afraid to find in the pauses, let alone the silence?

That’s not to say that there were no touching moments, there were several, in fact – but a large chunk of the time was agitated air and light – and I am still not sure why.

What is certain is that Wisdom was not pleased with the noise and agitations in place of real thought and silence in contemplation. She lets everyone know, too:

Because I have called and you refused to listen, have stretched out my hand and no one has heeded, and you have ignored all my counsel and would have none of my reproof, I will also laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh.

It seems that wisdom, maybe like the enlightened, **can** have a bit of an edge! Wisdom can also be a bit vindictive as the rest of the reading pointed out.

However, there is a thread here – a thread about listening and being silent enough to hear what is really present and calling. It’s in the silence that no one wants to disturb, that truth can be found – often at a price.

Rather, say some: leave it alone, let’s stay busy over here – there’s no telling what we may find if we stir up the silence. Turn on the lights, crank up the music, and dance!

Many of you, I hope, remember Simon and Garfunkel. If you do, you’ll remember this song, the words of which are on an insert in your bulletin. Think for a moment while you listen to the lyrics from this classic – if you don’t hear a bit of Proverbs and Wisdom come through.

Consider the times it was written: 1966 and the social unrest in this country, heightened by a buildup in troops to 250,000 in March of the same year. Then, give it some thought to today and the pace we keep and the concerns we have. Have you ever felt like we just can't get to the truth, the center, the solution? Listen to the poets Paul and Art:

Sounds of Silence, Simon and Garfunkel, 1966

Hello darkness, my old friend,
I've come to talk with you again,
Because a vision softly creeping,
Left its seeds while I was sleeping,
And the vision that was planted in my
brain
Still remains
Within the sound of silence.

In restless dreams I walked alone
Narrow streets of cobblestone,
'Neath the halo of a street lamp,
I turned my collar to the cold and damp
When my eyes were stabbed by the
flash of
a neon light
That split the night
And touched the sound of silence.

And in the naked light I saw
Ten thousand people, maybe more.

People talking without speaking,
People hearing without listening,
People writing songs that voices never
share
And no one dared
Disturb the sound of silence.

"Fools" said I, "You do not know
Silence like a cancer grows.
Hear my words that I might teach you,
Take my arms that I might reach you."
But my words like silent raindrops fell,
And echoed
In the wells of silence

And the people bowed and prayed
To the neon god they made.
And the sign flashed out its warning,
In the words that it was forming.
And the signs said, The words of the
prophets
are written on the subway walls
And tenement halls.
And whisper'd in the sounds of silence.

Jesus knew these sounds and whispers of silence. He entered fully into the place everyone left quiet.

Prophet, priest, wise man, enlightened leader, and agitator – all rolled into one: Jesus.

No wonder he was such a threat. He really did break the mold as his ministry developed: by entering the silence intentionally, he challenged the entire religious/social/political system of his day. He disturbed the undisturbable with his being, refusing to let it envelope those around him in a first century form of stultification – or as a friend of mine used to call it "getting stupid."

And Jesus knew, he knew that what he was doing was dangerous. Look at his question to the disciples in Mark's readings: "Who do people say I am?"

Jesus knew that as people more and more began to see him as the Messiah – that the danger was increasing, the tempo of his time beat with more intensity. His work was not yet done; forestalling the growing crescendo would give him a little time to live and to work.

"Who do they say I am?" might be paraphrased in a different time as, "How close are they," trying to stay ahead of an advancing multitude. "How much more time do I have?"

And yet he wanted to reveal himself to his disciples, to allow them to see who he was and learn all he had to teach; and maybe his question to them; "Who do you say that I am" was framed to see if they, too, had caught the fever. Had even those closest to him inadvertently become part of a growing acclamation and hysteria that was undermining his mission?

Was Jesus' command to the disciples to "Tell no one" a command to keep the truth close at hand – as well as an attempt to slow down the inevitable hysteria that seemed to be growing all around him?

Jesus knew the danger of disturbed silence and he knew the necessity of it.

So, with the time he had, he continued to teach the disciples the secrets of this life and the next, in ways that reflected much of the Ancient Near East teachings and his Hebrew heritage. He was a wisdom teacher, a prophet, priest, mystic, rabbi and more. He knew much and they had much to learn.

And of sacrifice, he probably knew that his last corporal lesson would be to give up his body in order to teach others how to keep their soul.

Jesus knew the Romans and the crowd mentality that was blood thirsty as any mob can be. He had seen the thousands of crucifixions lining the streets and hills of his youth and adulthood, orchestrated by the Romans to ensure that everyone knew what was ahead for them if they crossed the State.

Here, then, was Jesus – knowing that such a fate might be his, and with the clock ticking – he taught and modeled, and rejected the distraction of any who would deter him from his work and ministry – even Peter, well meaning as he was; even Peter felt the sting of a strong rebuke when he tried to move Jesus from what he had to say.

There was no deterring Jesus from the mission to which he was called. Even when the voices became deafeningly loud and those around him seemed to have learned so little – he continued. What fear he had was overcome by the faith and belief in the teachings of those who had gone before him and in the call he knew in his heart.

It seems to me that Jesus must have been enlightened, if only because of how we have been enlightened by him.

But there is more...and it is in the silence we know him and ourselves in ways otherwise -- unknowable. It is in the silence that we find what is yet unspoken, eternal, the antecedent and descendent of enlightenment.

I think Mother Teresa is right:

We need to find God, and [God] cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature - trees, flowers, grass - grows in silence; see the stars, the moon and the sun, how they move in silence... We need silence to be able to touch souls.

It is here in this place. I know. I touch it here, often, with you.

Amen.