

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Twentieth-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 22, 2006

On Reflection:

'Baptism evokes all the rich biblical images of water. Water was the first element of creation, over which the Spirit hovered and from which came all life. Water overwhelmed a world gone wrong with destructive force. Water parted and slaves walked to freedom on dry land. Water flowed from a rock to quench the thirst of a parched and grumbling band of wanderers. Water from a young woman's womb surrounded a baby boy as God took on flesh to dwell among us. Water spilled over this baby now grown into the man Jesus and his identity as Beloved of God was proclaimed. Water will flow through the city of God where all people gather in peace and the nations are healed." *Call to Worship*. Volume 40.1, 2006-2007 p. 105.

Readings: Job 38:1 – 7(34-41)
The Gospel of Mark: 10: 35-45
Hymns: #467 How Great Thou Are
#248 You Are Before Me, Lord

EGO: **E**asing **G**od **O**ut
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Love based on a desire for gain is worthless. God is desireless; how could one with desire attain the Desireless? When I was conscious of individual existence, the love of the Master filled my heart; When the love of the Master filled my heart, my sense of selfhood was dissolved. O Kabir, this path is too narrow for two to travel.

So said the Indian poet and mystic Bénarès, somewhere around the fifteenth century.

It is the type of revolutionary sentiment that makes a difficult translation from the fifteenth century to today, not because the words are difficult, but because the concept of selflessness causes a great deal of disequilibrium in the Western mind.

We adjust more readily to Job's story of being tested by God, losing it all, falling into despair, cursing God, being admonished by God for forgetting who was in charge, forgiven, and ultimately restored to wealth and prosperity. That, well, makes sense to us.

Job's sin, perhaps an appropriate response to being toyed with by God, Job's sin is that his ego got in the way. He "eased God out," replacing God with Job's self, attributing his success to living in a certain way and being justly compensated for his faithfulness. Job, inadvertently, egotistically, had begun to manage God – "I have done this, God; now, God, you do this. You promised. Remember?" Telling God what to do is sure to bring a response – and we heard that retort clearly in this morning's reading.

Even so, The Book of Job makes an easy translation into modern times and modern thinking. It has throughout the ages, starting from its uncertain origin, perhaps as far back as the Macedonians, in one form or another. It's imagery and lessons have been used to help people understand and weather difficult times – in both secular and spiritual settings. It has often been used as a model or precedent for the importance of arguing with God and the resolution of such arguments through ultimate faith in the Maker of the Universe.

But Jesus in Mark's readings this morning, while also about expectations and the ego of some of his disciples, centrally James and John – in these readings Jesus rejects the notion of earthly reward the disciples are seeking, disciples who are still holding on to the idea that the kingdom Jesus is promising them is going to be like other kingdoms they have known before – with privilege, status, power – all in a palatial setting. All of which they have been otherwise denied. The fact that these things were potentially in sight must have been intoxicating; why else would they have been so off the mark?

Jesus wastes not time in reversing this paradigm in a stunning way. The Interpreter's Bible calls it a "violent reversal of earth's measurements of greatness [that] could go no farther...It is a complete revolution, the inauguration of an upside-down world. The whole social pyramid is reversed." Jesus the *acuistador* – one who stirs things up!

"...whoever wishes to be first among you must be a slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

I shake my head and just wonder, "How do we ever live up to this? Where do we go from here?" It's almost like last week's readings about "getting through the eye of a needle." Like, c'mon, Jesus, how are we supposed to do this stuff...give up everything, become a slave to all, childlike...

What was Jesus trying to do?

If I had to guess, I would say he was trying to change hearts. That's the place where change most matters.

The 1897 edition of the Easton dictionary says that: "According to the Bible, the heart is the centre not only of spiritual activity, but of all the operations of human life."

The trouble comes when we internalize and confine spiritual activity and operations in human life -- in limited, human ways – as Job did, as the apostles attempted to do.

As humans, we can only think within the limits of our own experiences and the thoughts they produce, but there is more – we all know that. We are more than our minds. It is that “more” I would suspect that draws us here and moves us in our lives in all kinds of ways.

As much as we might come to God in an intellectual way, we’re in over our heads from the start – so it’s going to take more than self, thinking, and control. And once we get the self in the center of things, once we become the producer, director, and the star – we’ve eased God out and, replaced by the ego and the progressively declining direction of a human mind that believes it is in charge.

“Danger, Will Robinson.”

Trust me on this, I can be inclined to take charge with the best of those who are so inclined! I’ve learned the hard way how destructive that can be; I didn’t learn to listen easily; it is an ongoing developmental process for me. There was a time when I had the terminally unique condition referred to as “becoming a legend in my own mind!”

It was also exceptionally difficult for me to trust what I could not see in ways that really counted. I could easily give God free hand on world issues, the universe, and other things far enough out of my control that even I knew I could do nothing about them. However, on the things close to hand, the things I really wanted to go a certain way – those were harder, still are. But, I have come to know in my heart how amazingly God manifests God’s self when I move to the side. It is in these things when I learn to let go – the really amazing things happen.

And so, it is this that I think Jesus is trying to teach the apostles, that anything we humans design is simply flawed – chief among those flawed designs is any institution. And we cannot let who we are be compromised by such things – whether in actions or how we set our goals and sights for life. For, whatever it is that we are doing – none of it will matter very soon. What matters is how you care for one another in that Jesus has taught us and we are called to teach others.

We will always live somewhere in the tension of these things. Yet, there are times when we have a respite from the “push and pull.” One of those times for me has been this period with you, as your interim minister. Many people, especially those unfamiliar with Presbyterian polity, have had a hard time wrapping their minds around the idea that the interim cannot be hired as the permanent minister. It makes no sense to them, especially if it appears that the interim and the congregation are a good “fit,” so to speak.

My response has been what I have learned, and that is that the interim time is a very sacred moment in the lives of the congregation and the minister. It is a time, in many, many ways of unconditional service to one another. There is no jockeying for position in the search for a permanent pastor, working extra hard to have the best chance for the call. Instead, we work together in a relatively unfettered spiritual setting, using the time to settle, pray, prepare, and discern with one another for the next phase in the life of this congregation that dates back more than 140 years.

It is ultimately about the unselfish love that is the central symbol of our faith, the cross that reminds us what one gave so that we might live. It is about operating in a revolutionary setting or dimension that sets us apart from this world – so that we can serve and heal in this world. It is about leaving more and more space in our lives and dealings with one another for truth and the Spirit, which I think are One. It is about trusting that we will be led...and asking for courage to let go, so that we might learn to trust.

On Tuesday morning of this last week, at 10:30 A.M. another of us has gone to the place of eternal trust and reward. Edith packed up her 82 years on this earth and stepped out ahead of us with all the others that have gone before. She and others are dearly missed, but in no way are they gone, or out of our lives. With the stories of Edith that we will always remember, each sharing our own special ones, what we will always be a central thread is her kindness to others. More than all things that pass through our hands, it is the kindness and service to others that is never forgotten. May we all be so remembered, as faithful and loving servants who put the self aside so we could all be one. We already miss you Edith!

Amen.