

Palisades Presbyterian Church

Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 12, 2006

Reflection:

“We’ve said it again and again in these pages: the secret message of Jesus isn’t primarily about ‘heaven after you die.’ It doesn’t give us an exit ramp or escape hatch from this world; rather, it thrusts us back into the here and now so we can be part of God’s dream for planet Earth coming true. But even so, since mortality rates are still pretty high, it’s natural for us to ask what the message of the [kingdom] of God has to say about ‘heaven after your die.’”

- From The Secret Message of Jesus by Brian D. McLaren p. 183

Readings: Ruth 3:1-5; 4:13-17

The Gospel According to Mark 12: 38-44

Hymns: #292 All Beautiful the March of Days

#377 Lord You Have Come

#525 Be Thou My Vision

God is Blessing Us
©2006 Ray Bagnuolo

It may be hard to believe, but tomorrow is the one year anniversary of my ordination, which many here attended – and all of you, in one way or another, precipitated! One year ago, we stood in front of the assembled presbytery and stated our intention to work together in this interim time. You called me, standing by your declaration that you would choose the person as you saw to be the best candidate, regardless of sexual orientation. You called a gay man, me, in case you were wondering, and then we went about our work, waiting for charges, repercussion, problems, pickets – whatever. You had long before committed yourself to a welcoming and healing ministry, replete with a rare combination of justice and chutzpah, faith and courage, love and healing. Our work went forward and the charges never came. I guess “they” knew better.

In many ways, this last month has been a reflection of the year we completed in September, since my work began here before my ordination on October 1.

This weekend, we said farewell to Edith Ryan in a wonderful and moving ceremony that brought family and friends together. Hers was our seventh memorial in 13 months, having said farewell and comforted and been comforted by the families and friends of Pam Stiles, Liz Finck, Ann Gray, Doug Douglas, Henry Roth, Elizabeth Shore, and Edith.

One cannot be a part of the congregation during such sacred times in peoples' lives and not be moved or touched. Among the many things that happen, we enter into a conversation about this life and "the next," while at the same time coming together as a congregation to support the families in their time of grief and mourning, while we support one another.

It was so clear an obvious again this weekend, as more than 130 people attended Edith's service on a Friday, welcomed into this sanctuary and then afterwards to a gathering of hearts and offerings of hospitality and warmth in the Parish House. I saw it, the truth that I have known for some time – this is a healing congregation: of itself and for others. Those same hearts were here long before I arrived, and I have been the beneficiary of your healing and welcoming touch, as well.

Now, some of you may wonder what this all has to do with Ruth, uncovering Boaz's "feet" a euphemism for genitals, you knew that right? And inviting him to sleep with her in his somewhat drunken state, so that she might have his child and be protected in his household? Well, I wondered that myself! I have learned that all things are connected in God's way, and I will make an attempt to bring it together, feeble as it might be.

Ruth. I gave thought to the archaic practices of the times, the abuse of power, and domination of women in the Bible, the social order that required such actions as hers to be safe, and then I found myself caught in the love of Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law – seeking comfort and security for Ruth, as Naomi moved into her elder years. It was a different time – yet in the same way as today, we seek comfort and security for the years ahead – but sometimes that's not the answer. I guess in my heart, I would have rather seen Ruth not succumb to the deception and entrapment of her and Naomi's actions. And yet, who am I? Had Ruth not slept with Boaz, she would not have borne a son: Obed, whose lineage would later include Jesse, and David, and from whose house Jesus would later be born.

It does spice up the Bible, don't you think?

But then, it was a different time. I've actually had no desire to live during that time, probably because it would have been so hard, so maybe Naomi and Ruth did well and right in their efforts to survive and provide. The Scriptures seem to think so, especially when they state that the LORD blessed Ruth and Boaz with a child. Perhaps it was all a mitzvah, a blessed miracle of sorts.

A connection for us, today, may be that even though the practices are distasteful to us – the lesson tells us that the community was there. Boaz married Ruth, Naomi became the child's nurse, and a unity was formed – a community was formed that produced the next generations in the unfolding story of God's relationship to humanity – which *is* the Old Testament.

Is it unity that transcends itself into the communal? Common purposes that brings people together, becoming community? Held together by greater values and beliefs that eventually become less self-serving and more out-reaching to those in need? Are we in a time capsule of sorts, seeing history and our heritage unfolding? Maybe so...

In fact, I think so. And, it is the women making it happen – or at least God's agents forcing the changes... I like that even more.

And in Mark's reading this morning, Jesus reminds us we all – all – play a role, sometimes without ever knowing that is so. It seems that all we need to do is out part, whatever we can, even in sotto voce – a soft voice without all the puffing and grandiosity. No fanfare necessary. Just look at the widow. The widow places two coins into the offering and is forever immortalized – for two coins.

She did the best she could and that was enough. And so I think it is true for us. As awkward as this segue may be...

This is the time of the year we talk giving, about stewardship. I've only been here a year, but I know this to be a generous community with its time, caring, and resources. For those of you who may be new to the idea of stewardship and pledging, you should know that promised giving along with the generosity of the gifts that always seem to arrive just as we need them – are the church's main source of income. We do earn money from the rental of the Parish House, weddings, fund-raising events and such, but the bulk of the funds that make it possible for us to operate come from the weekly and monthly donations of the members and friends of this church. If you have any questions about this, please talk with just about anyone who has been here for a while and they can fill you in.

The bottom line, though, is that we are blessed. We are blessed in the giving we receive and the giving we are able to offer as a spiritual community. Yes, we have said farewell to many, but we have also welcomed new members: Catherine Hooper, Nina VonEckardt, Denise and Tom Donofrio along with the baptisms of Sophie Fisher (Jonathan Fisher and Catherine Hooper's daughter), Sophia Donofrio, and Ruby Son-Mae, daughter of Anne Marie and James-Robert Sellinger.

This sanctuary is alive with giving of ourselves to one another and to the God we come here to worship, so that we might remember to find that God in all ways and all places in our lives. For God's omnipresence is just that.

And the Holy Spirit is all around her. The volunteers who make this church operate each week, week after week – from the cleaning to the Pal Pres Newsletter and everything in between. To the marvelous community use of the Parish House for Children’s Shakespeare Theater to presentations on Habitat for Humanity, the choir and music that lifts us into worship each week, the ushers, the Poetry and other Readings by friends and authors, concerts by sons and daughters of the community, pot-luck suppers, and themed dinners, strawberry festivals and spring and winter clean-up, theater benefit nights, the casserole contingent when folks cannot cook for themselves, the deacons work and letters, office volunteers, midnight runs to be with the homeless poor as equals in God’s eyes, to committees on worship, parish life, inclusion, mission, building and grounds, worship and arts, opening our doors to those in recovery for meetings, Tai Chi, Bible Studies, the greening of the sanctuary, wreath-making, the education of our children in the Christian tradition, the gardening, the neighbors, equal justice for all, and in all...

There is this giving...a blessing of giving...not for its sake alone, although it probably would be enough if it were ... but because deep inside we come together in the unity of our belief in all its variations that God is in this work. Just as God has been in the work and lives of all creation through all times, God is in this work and Jesus is our example that we follow in the two simplest and most important of commandments:

To love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our might – and to love one another as we love ourselves. It doesn’t matter whether it is planting a tree in memory to Ann or the change of a light bulb or the sweep of the sanctuary – it is for and about one another that we serve. Look around: we are us. We are the Palisades Presbyterian Church. Tell you neighbor: “We are the Church.”

And that has been my role and time here. To serve you. The time though is approaching when another will fill that sacred role in the life of this congregation. What a gift it is to be here with you in this love fest, with a few rough edges here and there – mostly mine – but a love fest nonetheless. This unconditional time with no motives other than to work together to prepare for the next blessed giving of this congregation – the giving of a call to the one who has yet to know they will be here. And to receive their blessing in return.

There is still much we have to do together, and I will be here until your next minister has been called or you invite me to leave, should that process falter and I somehow block the way for it to proceed, for that is what I have to give to you: an interim time that is a blessing, clear and unencumbered in the best way I know how.

Your Session will be considering a Mission Study report this next week. Shortly after that the real work of seeking and interviewing for your permanent minister will begin. Will he or she be part or full-time? Will we be able to raise the additional \$40,000 or so a year it will take to have a full-time minister return? Will we continue part-time or somewhere in between as we seek to serve and grow? Will the minister live locally in the manse or off-grounds so to speak, as the congregation continues to benefit from the amazing work and contributions Sharon has given us in repairing the manse during her time there? These and more questions await you, me, and us – in these exciting weeks and months ahead. Weeks and months that will also call us to continue as the giving Christian community we are - welcoming all as we seek to grow in faith and serve others. There is no pause as we move forward.

And, we are blessed here - from the two coins right on up to the largest of pledges. But there is more. We are not a club. We are a church. A spiritual community. That means that we rely on the role of the Holy Spirit in finding ways for us to help ourselves and one another, for we believe in the command to ask and it will be given. We embrace the idea of unlimited abundance in God's design, and we take the risk in believing that – and that it is in giving we receive. We all know that. We have all felt the exhaustion and the exhilaration of having done so. It's the way it works.

Examples of the blessings of this congregation were perhaps summed up this weekend in two comments by those who had come to be with us in one way or another. First, at the end of the Memorial Service for Edith, when everyone had left, I was sitting in the pastor's office. There was a knock on the outside door and when I opened it Robert and Tom Ryan were there. They wanted to thank us for everything, and they wanted to tell me about the comment they heard over and over about how this was such an amazing church and how welcome everyone felt. How they were sad for losing their mom, but how good they felt following the time with all of us. Thank you, they said, from deeply within – it was easy to see.

The second was following our wedding service on Saturday. Later at the reception, the mother of the bride told me a story about her friend who was not a Christian who at one time had refused to go into Saint Patrick's Cathedral with her on a trip to NYC. That was years ago, yet she was still surprised to see him show up in this sanctuary at her daughter's wedding. Later he told her how welcomed he felt here, a comment repeated by several others. Even though they knew nothing about us, they felt us – for what Michael and I did, we do each week with you and in our words and music you and the unmistakable Spirit of this church, your hearts were with us as we are now. That's how the Spirit works. That's why we do what we do.

Who knows how it will move through the time and the ages, this work we do?
And, you know, it doesn't really matter. It just matters that we heed the call to do it.

Please, when you get the chance, take a moment and think about what we as a community have shared and given over the last year together. (And the many more years you have had together.) And then look to the future, not in terms of the pastoral waters parting for a new minister to emerge – but for the continued blessing upon you all and how you will continue to pass those blessings on to others.

For there is no love greater than that – in giving of ourselves to others.

And how I know, easy – the Bible (and you) have told me so.

Amen.