

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Palisades, New York

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 14, 2008

Readings:

Romans: 14: 1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

Healing? A blessing.
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“We are a congregation who strives to provide a safe place for everyone. Some of our friends and members have a clear sense of their own mission in life; others are struggling to find a sense of spirituality; and still others would not speak of a church in those terms, but would instead emphasize their love for the community. All are equally welcome. We try to listen to each other, uncritically and with patience and openness, believing that everyone brings gifts that should be shared. We realize that we do not always succeed in this ideal, but we know that when we do, we ourselves grow and God’s purposes are served.”

– Opening paragraph from the “Mission Study 2006”
of Palisades Presbyterian Church, October 15, 2006

Paul could have written this. As he moved across the land in the middle of the first century, throughout Jerusalem, Syria, Greece, Italy, and Jerusalem, again, where his planned trip to Spain was halted by his final incarceration – his sense of community and Jesus and Judaism would likely have brought a resounding, “Yes!” in reading such a statement.

Reading it, he might have felt as though he had gotten through to whoever had written it, finally! It wasn’t always easy for Paul: the struggles of community, secular influences, tensions surrounding the increasing diversity of followers, guidelines for faithfulness in the midst of emerging sects and governmental infringements – all these things and more challenged him on a regular basis. It wasn’t always easy, but still...he called it out in his teachings to others:

“Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.” Romans 14:1

In Paul’s writings, words like “faith” or “grace” are often used as metonyms, that is attributes of Jesus used to indirectly refer to Jesus. If that is true, then he is here saying, basically, if you find yourself drawn here – or even just happening here – you are welcome here in our midst. Not to be argued with, debated, or proselytized to – welcome...and your gifts are important to us. We consider you a blessing as we grow in the teachings of the one called Jesus.

Or as our Mission Statement says:

“We are a congregation who strives to provide a safe place for everyone.”

A little while later in the readings, Paul asks,

“**Who are you** to pass judgments on the servants of another? It is before their own lord they stand or fall.” Romans 14:4

And, once again, Paul might have written the answer to “*Who are you...*” from the section of our *Mission Study*, aptly titled, “**Who We Are**”:

“Our religious backgrounds are very diverse. Some of us, but only a minority, have attended a Presbyterian Church since childhood. For some of us, too, but again only a minority, Palisades Presbyterian Church is the first church that we have ever attended, begun well after adulthood...Many could correctly be called theologically liberal, but such a designation would fail to capture our focus on individual healing and spirituality. Many of us have stories, poignant and only occasionally told, of God’s transformative power in our lives.”

Paul would have said, “Welcome, to us!” I am sure. Just as we do to the others who visit.

In this morning’s reading of Romans and these excerpts from our Mission Study, we get a glimpse, I think, into what it is that creates a healing, blessing center in this church. First and foremost, we truly do welcome God’s great diversity in the people and their beliefs. In fact, we not only welcome people, we invite them to join us. As a result, we become that diverse group of believers.

Secondly, we acknowledge that there are different faith journeys in each of our lives, often with backgrounds in different faith traditions, and while we use the language of our own teachings, we know that the words we use are at best pointers to the wonder and vastness of God; God, well beyond our grasp and yet evident in every direction we turn – if we but look.

Here, it seems we look more often than not!

And, seeing God all around us, welcoming God in others in wildly generous ways has a great impact on many who still have concerns and second thought about, well, “church.” Entering a space like this, getting an idea of the sacredness and joy that abounds here, begins to remove the tightness of breath, the clench of the teeth or the fists, and the apprehension or past experiences or even condemnations begin to drift away, along with the guilt that has accompanied many for so long, institutionalized in some churches for so long, absent here – for longer than that.

We and our visitors begin to remember – or maybe experience for the first time – the blessing and healing that comes with being in a place and with others who breathe in the Spirit. I can't even begin to describe what happens over time in such a place, except that there begins a resonance of healing that has profound effects.

Suddenly things come into focus, from how we deal with one another to how we look at our time on this planet in terms of God's will for us. We see ways to take care of one another with more tenderness and meaning, while beginning to see our lives in terms of the spiritual beliefs we embrace. And the stories, the stories we share that encourage each of us to continue when our own steps are a bit halting or downright painful to take.

“We know that *it's not all about us*,” says our Mission Study, “[we believe] God's love embraces the world and everyone in it. Of course, we realize that the problems of the world are very great and not easily solved, and furthermore, that all of us share some of the responsibility for their being there. But we have a fervent hope for the future. [And] we do what we can...”

Most of all we enter Love.

Last week we talked about how important it is to forgive ourselves on the road to loving ourselves and thus being useful to others. We spoke of how difficult it has been for many of us, I include myself here, in accepting our own humanity and limitations, our own lack of power in controlling the events and actions of others – or predicting the outcomes. We reminded ourselves, last week, that once we let go of such heavy and unreasonable burdens of being perfect and in charge of the world, we could begin to heal the pain that sometimes gets in the way of loving ourselves and extending that outward. We talked about leaving the centrifugal force of our own reiterated needs, and releasing the past, so that we could find serenity and peace enough to pay attention to one another – all sorts of one another, as the Spirit and God – however we know either –lead us!

Even contemplating such a thing has a freeing sense of leaving the bonds of such a place.

As I worship with you this morning, I know this is what we attempt to do: we truly do love others and, yet, we never feel as though we are doing enough. And so we gather and pray, to remember that we are not alone, to ask for help, and to know once more that we are not the only ones active in God's endeavor of love and healing. There are others reaching out, as well, in as many different ways as there are people. We are part of a broad, life-changing ministry of healing and blessings, a part of the mission of God in this world, that starts here and in other places like here and grows and grows and grows until, one day, there will be a convergence of Love and Spirit as never seen before.

We may never see the end results of our work in our time here, but we will see some of it, we have already, and ultimately, just to know we are a part of it – is really enough. We just have to do our part and God takes care of the rest...

Matthew reminds us of the simple directions Jesus gave his disciples for doing such a thing, living in such a way. In Matthew's reading this morning, when Jesus replies to the question of how often you should forgive a church member who sins against a brother or sister, instead of the rabbinical code of three times, or Peter's generosity in suggesting seven, Jesus replied "Seventy times seven" – not meaning 490, but in celestial math: seventy times seven times seven ... to infinity!" Or, until you forgive and forget. Another way of saying, "Forgive and love..."

The story of the land owner and his servant is only in the gospel of Matthew; it does not appear in Luke or Mark. However, it underscores the greatest commandment of all, inherent in the inserted parable: Love God with all your heart, and love one another as yourself." Simple to say...not always easy to do, a day at a time we try.

And in a few days, when our time together continues apart, the blessings of your powerful healing and mission will carry me, as it did as it did throughout all our time together. Even when we struggled here and there, the truth is that the healing we have known was there to draw upon because deep inside we wanted it. We had its longing in our hearts. We still do, and that's a very good thing. It is a blessing, indeed.

And those hearts and spirit and blessings and healing and love will welcome your new minister and their gifts into the mighty stream that courses through here, as it changes your lives and all those it will touch on its journey guided by the spirit.

I have known that to be true for a long time. So, has this congregation, our Mission Statement even states it:

"We are a congregation who strives to provide a safe place for everyone..."

And, truly that says it all.

Amen.