

Palisades Presbyterian Church  
Palisades, New York 10964  
September 28, 2008

Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-25

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Author's Note: This was delivered today, my last Sunday after three years as interim minister. The new minister, The Rev. Angela Maddalone Skinner, begins as the next permanent pastor on November 3, 2008.

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*I'll Take Number Two...*  
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I took a look back. I brought up my first sermon as Interim Minister to this congregation, delivered on October 2, 2005. If you were here, you may recall that it was a time shortly after my examination at presbytery and before my ordination, which would take place six weeks later. It was a pause in the kairos of great expansiveness and unknowing. Everything seemed wide!

My sermon title on that day was: "Do No Harm..." I began by talking about the recent capture of a giant squid by a Japanese research vessel that had hit the news. The crew hooked it, brought it in, and later dissected it – trying to force it to give up its secrets. It set-up my comments, so to speak, on how the urge to know something – sometimes does harm, sometimes unnecessarily. In this case, the squid's life was exhausted to find out more about its mystery. Research often requires such a thing and thoughtful people to know how to balance the need to know vs. the harm.

Somewhere in the body of my sermon, I said the following:

A mystery, a true mystery, remains so – and remains real. The inability to explain it should not be cause to acknowledge it as false. There are too often times when words can not, simply should not be able to unravel to our satisfaction the ambiguity that soars through the universe, ultimately successful in its resistance to all forces of determination to "figure it out." In fact, those are my favorite kind of mysteries; the ones than cannot be explained – some of those are the ones that give me the greatest hope.

While the readings this morning are not the same as they were on that October day in 2005, I was struck by the parallel with Matthew in the Scriptures read by Jane, especially the response of Jesus when he refused to tell the chief priests and the elders by what authority he was doing the things they had heard and seen. Jesus understood the presence of mystery and lived in it. He knew,

perhaps, that there are just times when “telling” and “knowing” are too far apart. No examination or dissection can explain them. The best you can do is to just be who you have been made to be and do what you believe you have been called to do. Your example, not your words, will be enough in such instances.

In so many ways, my time here with you is a reflection from within that mystery. There is a deep and abiding “being” in this midst and a vast “knowing” that revolves well into the unexplained of God’s great universe. Living, as you strive to do in such a way places the keys to the kingdom in your hands, and you regularly use them to open doors and hearts as you go. Make no mistake; it is you who are partially responsible for the increase in sightings of the Holy Spirit, unleashed here on a regular basis!

We all know that an interim minister’s job is to bridge the time between former and new pastors in a way that gives the transition time to work things out. We have done that. Truly, we have done what we set out to do and we should feel blessed, grateful, and pleased.

And, in many conversations with you, we have talked about the changes that have taken place over our time together, and frequently I hear the words “healing” and “joy” in those conversations. I have to tell you, it’s enough to do a cartwheel over!

What I know about the deep mystery from which such things as healing and joy ignite, is that they are there long before they “suddenly” appear. What is so remarkable to me about the faith we share in God and the teachings of Jesus, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in all the ways you may know God – is that even when there is deep sadness and sorrow – we don’t run. We enter it with each other and in so doing discover, -- after a while, perhaps, but nonetheless – we discover the healing God, the joyful God, and the one another beside us, holding onto God, being held by God, as well. We do that here all the time.

And, of all that we have done, in the many ways we have been sisters and brothers to one another, God, has always been with us and will always be with us. We are always assured of healing, joy, and love. We will always be called to act, to serve, to “pass it forward,” because we have accepted the invitation to the wedding of justice and love. A union that took place here long ago and is thriving, just thriving as Palisades Presbyterian Church prepares for the next chapter.

For me, this is the “full accord and of one mind” that Paul refers to in Philippians. Again, the inadequacy of words as other than pointers to something greater, but the “full accord and of one mind” is our presence (full accord) in the God that we know (the one mind). From there, we move along on our journeys, our daily lives, “trying to be of the same mind of Jesus the Christ.” We become the prayer of Paul’s charge to “pray without ceasing.” We consciously begin to find more and more of God in our lives in more and more ways. We encounter Jesus along the

way. We have shared such stories. We practice what he teaches us, and we practice more, knowing this is not about perfection but progress. And in so doing, especially in community such as this, we know his presence, helping us, encouraging us, healing us. We – we are never alone with him. And, in some mysterious way, I think he is never alone with us, either.

And it is always important for me, for us, I think, to recognize that God moves in different ways and is known by many different names, yet, however it is we may find God, the balm that heals and soothes, that gives us strength and courage, that brings us to unconditional love to serve others – is always the same. It is a rose by any and every other name.

It is the unconditional love by which we are loved that calls us to serve others. The service is inherent in it and it is not complete without service. Goes together like a horse and carriage...you can't have one without the other!

It is what binds us together, even when we are far apart. It is our church, our mission, our call...our unity.

Some of you were here a couple of weeks ago as Scott Rasmussen brought many of us to tears, when during Joys and Concerns, and through his own tears and with the help of Grandma Beatrice – he said that he didn't want me to go.

Well, I can work it out pretty well with most of you, but Scott did me in.

After worship, Scott and I talked outside a bit. I put my arm around his shoulder and said, "You know, Scott, sometimes in life you make choices about getting to know people. Now and then you have to decide whether you are going to avoid getting too close to someone because if you do, you just know it's going to hurt when they leave. So you keep your distance and you never get to really know them and when they go, it doesn't hurt so much, and before you know it they are forgotten.

Other times, you just decide that you will let yourself get close, really get to know someone, and remember them the rest of your life, never forgetting them. Really, really caring for them, even though you know it's going to hurt a bit – maybe a lot when it comes time to say, "Good-bye."

I asked him, then, given the choice of either of those, which one he would rather have. He thought for only a second looked up at me and said, "I'll take number two." I looked back at him and said, "Me, too."

And I say to you, "Me, too."

Amen.