

Palisades Presbyterian Church
October 2, 2005

Twenty-seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
World Communion Sunday

Exodus: 20: 1-4; 4-7; 12-20
Matthew: 21: 33-46

Sermon Title: First, do no harm...
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An article in this morning's New York Times by William J. Broad is entitled "One Legend Found, Many Still to Go." It discusses some of the recent finds of scientists that have helped to debunk certain myths, while proving that others are, in fact, more than make believe.

Enter the story of the giant squid. Proven to exist and celebrated in literature and art to a greater than life status – the Japanese have actually hooked one of these creatures, while exploring its habits in its own setting some 3000 feet below the surface of the ocean. By standards, this particular squid was a small one – 26 feet long. Known to grow up to length of 60 feet with eyes the size of dinner plates, these are one of a handful of creatures that have always stirred the imagination in me. The article goes on to state that "It was the first peek humanity has ever had of such animals in their natural habitat." As a squid expert said of the shy creature in the piece: "There're always more questions, more parts to the mystery than we will ever be able to solve." Well, I'll tell you, if I were that squid, after my experience with humanity – I'd head even deeper into the depths!

It was funny to notice my reaction as I read the story. I was captured by the limited revelations given up grudgingly of a deep and private ocean, while I was also a little saddened that in some ways it this great natural wonder had in part, given up some of its secrets to our prodding and ever curious temperaments.

The title for this morning's sermon was on my mind, and I thought about how we sometimes seem to have to tear things apart – to do harm -- to satisfy our own need "to know." I thought to myself there are better ways, thinking about the virtual labs many schools use today instead of doing "live" dissections, so to speak. It seemed to me that the idea of "first doing no harm" crossed over easily, even into science.

What I really found myself thinking about was how we humans sometimes treat one another in our own interactions, interactions during which "doing or not doing harm" comes to mind too late in the process.

As many of you know, this was the week that I stepped under a microscope, of sorts, being examined by members of the presbytery to determine if I was qualified and fit to be ordained as your interim pastor. Several members

of this congregation attended the proceedings, representing the larger group, and your presence and prayers were greatly appreciated and personally moving to me. I knew I was far from being alone.

I knew, too, long before the meeting, that some of the questions would be about how I would abide by certain aspects of the constitution of our church, especially as a gay man. Unlike our unsuspecting deep water friend surprised by strange and curious humans, I could accurately guess that there were probes heading my way, and I knew, from past experiences on the floor of the general assembly, that some might wish to “take me apart” in order to find proof – of some kind – an “Aha! See, I told you so” – that I was unfit to serve based upon some unacceptable variation of God’s creation in me (if there were such a thing as an unacceptable variation in God’s creation)!

In some ways during that examination and at other times, I found myself struggling with myths. There are still many who cannot see beyond the limits of their conscious vision into the mystery that simply cannot be explained. And, rather than embrace that unknowable, mystical part of who we are and how we celebrate God’s love in one another – some folks are determined to take it apart, even when it is harmful to those on the receiving end of the investigation.

A mystery, a true mystery, remains so – and remains real. The inability to explain it should not be an invitation to discard it, or so I think. There have been all too often times when words could not, cannot, and simply should not be able to unravel to our satisfaction the ambiguity that soars through the universe, resistant to all forces of determination to “figure it out.” In fact, those are my favorite kind of mysteries the ones that cannot be explained – they are the ones, in fact, that give me greatest hope.

As we gather around the table this morning for the breaking of the bread on this World Communion Sunday, we will be taking part in the celebration of all of us being part of the one Body of Christ, with all the nuances and variations that makes the body we share whole. In some mystical way, when we hold up the bread and the cup, sharing it in memory of Jesus and his teachings and promise – we also share in the promise to one another – the promise to do no harm; to love one another. At the moment that we acknowledge this in the act of communion, in that moment all else ceases to be. We enter into an intimate space with one another beyond all that we know; we enter into the hopefulness that surrounds us in the vastness of God that we cannot even begin to imagine. In that place, in that mystery, we are safer than in our own determinations; in that depth, we are all and always welcome; and in that place the last thing we would ever do to one another would be to intentionally harm a sister or brother, whether stranger or friend. That is our body – that is our mystery. It is of God, that simply cannot be explained.

It was in that assurance, being a member of the Body of Christ by the nature of one baptism, that I trusted Tuesday, answering questions as directly and honestly and transparently as I could. Like a small child dropping his or her bucket into the ocean to scoop up some water at the shore’s edge, I tried to stand closely enough to the mystery to ladle out some of its power and being as I did my best to stand present. And, it was not something I did alone. As we are

now, I was present then in God's love with all others in that room. How we agreed or disagreed was less important, less hopeful and promising than in the fact that we were – are – all loved by God and freely given the grace we need to work things out.

We have relied on this power all our lives, whether we know it as I do as the Holy Spirit or another name – it is the power that makes up for the difference in what we know and what we could never know. It is the power where trust, faith, and love merge into a divine prescription for how we are to treat one another and how we are to lean forward into our lives together.

This power, this mystery, this Spirit is not going to yield its secrets to any investigation, unless it so chooses. More likely, I think, we need to rely more on its presence and power and live our lives accordingly, live in such a way that honors each and all of us for whom we are - from race to race, to different degrees of ableism and ages, genders, and yes – how we have been called to love one another.

First, do not harm...

Whether it was Hippocrates or the Roman physician Galen who first said it, "First, do no harm..." it makes me think...

If I lived with this consciously in my thoughts, it would first of all slow me down. It would change my perspective about how it was that I was interacting with others and how power came into play. If I lived like this, consciously, it would suggest that others are my responsibility to care for, not in a way that is destructively dependent or enabling, but in a way that recognizes that we share the same mystery – helping others to be who they are, even if we don't understand them - as they travel into the possibilities and wonder of God's design.

Living into a life that removed "harming others" means, I think, living into the teachings of the ancients and, especially, of Jesus.

The Decalogue or the Ten Commandments from our Exodus reading have their own mystery – and they have been studied and analyzed since they first appeared. Criticism based on the consistency of the language used in the Exodus rendering, suggests that even these may have been edited or redacted over the centuries. We will never know what the actual original words were that Moses gave to the Israelites in the desert, but we know enough to know that the essential message can still resonate with our own life and experiences. Experiences that remind us that as people of faith thousands of years later from this biblical event, we are still on the same faith journey, joining those who have gone before us in their attempts to be faithful, learning and growing through grace and the study of Scripture. There's hope in a mystery like that!

Exodus reminds us this morning that these words are always about our faithfulness to the love through which God that has brought us into being and together with one another. The law of the times of Exodus was seen as a law of love, some say, since it came from God who is love. It was about a romance between God and God's creation. People followed the law to show their gratitude to a God who had loved and rescued them.

Do no harm, do not diminish or underestimate the love I have shown you by having others gods before me.

Do no harm to others by using my name in vain ways, misleading others from finding their way to who it is I have called them to be.

Do no harm to yourself by always working, working, working - avoiding or forgetting the time to reflect upon the great love you share with me and each other.

Do no harm to others in your relationships with them or those they love....

These commandments are a Song of Love, long before David ever thought of writing his psalms.

Or in Matthew's text, about the landlord and the mistreatment of his slaves and sons by the renters. Whether this was actually an allegory spoken by Jesus (usually Jesus preached in parables, so there are some who question whether this was a direct teaching of Jesus) – or a variation written by Matthew to address some of the divisive issues of the times, what if the first rule of all those involved had been to do no harm? What might have been the outcome?

And, in fact, don't the teachings of Jesus provide instruction and insight into how to handle such situations without harm or deception? I wonder if among many other sayings, do no harm was what Jesus had in mind when he said to "Turn the other cheek"?

When we see things in this way, when we introduce the mystery and power of the teachings of Jesus into our lives and the 21st century the entire paradigm of society shifts from independent and collaborative determination to prove or disprove God's will to a direction of mutual concern and at least forbearance. Instead of being afraid of losing what we have or not getting what we want and doing everything we can to "get it right," we see our first responsibility to care for one another in the name of the one who has called us to care. Herein lies, I believe, the activation of the greatest mystery of all – the love of God, the power of the Holy Spirit, and abundant grace in our lives and our world. Yet, this "living into trust" doesn't always come easily.

How many times I have said to God, "Look, just this once, tell me what I am supposed to do! Give me an answer. Show me the way." Yet, every time I give this way of living, believing, caring, and loving a chance – something unexpected and wonderful occurs. And, in the process, I get a glimpse of the "face of God" that awes me when I begin to realize again what a mighty God it is that we have been called to serve.

So, after all is said and done, I think the article I referred to earlier made me feel as though I had to somehow protect the viability of certain mysteries. "WARNING! Not everything can be figured out! Don't forget that!"

In truth, mysteries don't need my protection, at all. But there is one mystery from which all things flow, and that is the Mystery we celebrate here this

morning as a community, the mystery we live into each day of our lives – centered deep in the teachings of Jesus and the One who sent him and calls us today.

So let us continue to worship and grow on this sacred ground and honor it always in the way we care for each other – in this sanctuary and beyond. Who knows, with the ways in which mysteries have a tendency to surprise us – we might just find ourselves being led by the Spirit into a world that really does know what it means to do no harm.

Let these doors stay open wide for the great and loving work that awaits us.

Amen

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For the Benediction

Rosh Hashanah is the first and second days of the first Jewish month of Tishrei. It marks the beginning of the Jewish new year. The celebration of this holiday is marked with solemnity, as it is the day on which the whole world is judged for the coming year. According to the Jewish traditions Rosh Hashanah is the birthday of the world, as it was on this day that G-d created humans - on the 6th day of creation. Every year, on this day, Jews proclaim G-d as their one and true God. This year, (2005-2006/5766) Rosh Hashanah, begins on Monday evening, October 3, 2005, and continues through Wednesday night, October 5, 2005.

Hashem Sefasai Tiftach / G-d Open My Lips

A toddler thinks that she cannot walk, but she can. A child fears he will never swim, but he will. Each of us is aware of our abilities and potential, and we all experience fear, doubt and hesitation. Many of our limitations in life are more perceived than real. Often, it is only phantoms that are holding us back. In Hebrew the word for lips is the same as the word for banks, as in river banks. The banks of a river define its limits. When we say "G-d, open my lips," we are also saying, "G-d, help me to see beyond my perceived limitations. Help me to see all the way to the horizon of my potential."

I will create time in my life to nurture my soul.

Life is a gift I received; I will find a way to "give something back."

In this tradition, let us pray and ask God to open our lips to the greatness of God within and beyond all we know, asking for the blessings we need to nurture our souls and care for one another, in the name of Jesus, Amen