

Palisades Presbyterian Church
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 30, 2005

Readings: Psalm 107: 1-7
Matthew 23: 1-12

Hymns: #138 Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!
#332 Spirit of the Living God, Fall Afresh on Me
#319 Spirit
#591 Praise God from Whom all Blessings Flow
#554 God, Let All Things Now Living

Teaching Practice
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I remember somewhere learning about Mazlow's Heirarchy of Needs. You may remember it, too. It says that we all develop according to certain general patterns of needs-realization. Shaped like a pyramid, the idea is that we start out at the bottom of the hierarchy and will initially seek to satisfy basic needs, such as food and shelter, moving upward as each lower level is satisfied.

The five parts are as follows:

Physiological Needs - food
Safety Needs – Security and Protection
Social Needs a Sense of Belonging and Love
Esteem Needs, Self Recognition. Status
Self-actualization

Now, there are some problems with this, as with any model trying to explain human behavior, but I was always struck by the higher “need” at the top of the pyramid. When I first learned about Maslow, that peak was called “Generativity” – the strong desire/need at the top one one's of development to pass on what they have learned in some way.

I wondered if I would every get there; I still wonder. However, in many ways, being a minister and teaching is an attempt to do that, for me. And in thinking about how I have gotten to this day and will get to the next, I have people who have gone before me on my mind.

I have always been blessed with strong personalities in my life. As a kid, I didn't really understand that, rather I knew my world through people who were “around”

me: family, friends, and neighbors. And, within my family – my grandparents are the first to come to mind.

Grandparents! I barely knew my mother's parents; they both died at a very young age. My father's parents were another story. I remember the interaction between my parents and my grandfather, mostly. There was a very good relationship there, although conflict sometimes arose in the early days. Yet, grandpa was a giant to me and grandma, who died when I was about 11, was one of those nooks and crannies I talked about last week, she was a place of safety, chocolate chip cookies, and probably from whom I got my taste for extremely hot Italian peppers!

You know those stories you cringe to hear in public when they're told about you... Well, I won't tell you one of those! But I will tell you one that's told about how I used to leave our apartment in the basement of our house in the Bronx, slipping out of the place whenever I could, scampering up to the third floor as fast as I could, and knocking on the door until Grandma answered. She would come to the door with this feigned look of surprise on her face saying, Raymond, how did you get here! And I would say, "Fast! Fast!"

How did I get there, would be a question I would ask often in my life.

Grandpa loved to walk, take the train, and was a man of habits. One day, while driving under the el in the Bronx, near where I grew up on E238th Street, I saw grandpa walking on White Plains Road. I asked him where he was going. He said to get a haircut. I figured he was going to the barber down the road a bit and told him I'd give him a ride. When he got in the car and I asked him which barber he was going to I found myself on the way to Brooklyn. He had his ways, and I loved him and them. When I asked him if he wanted a ride, it never occurred to me that he would be on the way to the same barber he knew for years in Coney Island. Didn't matter, though, time with him was really what it was about.

However, just as with the question grandma had asked – "How'd you get here?" and with my own admission that "I wasn't thinking," in those days, the truth was I was still working a lot of stuff out. It's not that there were a lot of problems (they came later), it was just that the world and its ways were slowly revealing themselves to me, and in the process, much of what I was learning – all of it I think – was coming in through other people.

People of influence, my parents, Dr. Doane, the family doctor, Father Monahan, our priest, the nuns who taught me, Mr. Millman, the appliance store owner, Vinny – the pizzeria guy; Leah, the woman who always sat on the stoop next to our house, Aldo – and the long procession of big shiny black cars and cigar smoking friends, who would always be in the yard next door – friendly but distant, and later years - teachers in high school and college had a profound influence on me. My family's influence was even stronger, noting how I grew up to enter the

same profession in sales, as my father, and came to like many of the same things as he. They were early, in some ways, uninvited mentors.

Later, though, I did discover – consciously – mentors, people who took an interest in me – this person of too many ideas and directions, too much energy and perseverance, and they began to help me to mold myself in ways that would give me a chance to integrate many of the bits and pieces of me into something that had a productive outcome.

My most influential mentor in the field of business was a man named Jack Lynch, who used to call me Raymond Tea Bags. Or Baggy. We were in the plastic bag business, he was the founder and president of the company, and he loved his family and the people that worked for him. I lived in Wisconsin at the time when the company was just getting started. I transferred from sales in the New York area to Appleton, Wisconsin and was the first formal employee and manager of the of the marketing department. Jack took me under his wing. His “people based style” is a perspective on business and what is possible with others that is still with me today. His mentorship took a part of me and gave it new form and purpose. And there are so many others...

I started on this direction when I first read this morning’s gospel and stopped at the words “for they do not practice what they teach.” You heard Richard read it this morning:

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat (that is the teaching seat in the synagogue); therefore do what they teach you and follow it [saying, perhaps, that what they were teaching was true, right, appropriate to follow], but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach.”

Matthew has an agenda here, one that uses a broad brush to take a swipe at all the Pharisees and scribes. In truth, his target audience was probably only a small group within the broader community of Pharisees and scribes, many of whom were certainly dedicated and humble in their work. The Torah, after all called for humility in the work of such people. But, there were also some, as today in any profession, who sought the power and prestige at the expense of integrity, and in this case abused it in demanding more of the people who they directed than they were willing to give of themselves.

“They do not practice what they teach.” So Jesus said.

Jesus. Messiah, Lord, Rabbi, Teacher, Prophet.

Jesus was all these things to his disciples and followers in one fashion or another. Maybe, in a modern time, we would have called him Mentor?

If so, though, what is the difference between rabbi/teacher and mentor? What did he really do in his ministry? What did those who have come in and out of my life do that made them more than teachers? Why do some people seem to have such an influence in our lives?

I am going to ask you to take 10 seconds, less even, and think of one person who has made a tremendous difference in your life. Ready, go....

Let's make a prayer of their names and how they influenced you. Let's take a few of the names and have you give us a brief explanation of who they are and what they did to influence you.

[Congregational Responses]

I am going to suggest that what they did, in some way, may have been that they created a sense of you within yourself, by who they were or what they did – that gave you the vision -- the motivation to move in a certain direction, regardless of the obstacles that might be ahead.

They taught you to believe, and then maybe even the greatest of gifts – they taught you to practice without being deterred when you met with less than the success anticipated or hoped for. Perhaps they helped you, as those who have helped me, to not give up, to continue – knowing that I will never really get it “right” for there is no “right” but that if I continue at it and keep practicing – well, that vision – or something like it – will always be there, with me, moving as I do through this life. Truly, a gift.

I think Jesus did this. His teachings were all about stay the course, keep trying, practice, learn more, more will be revealed, ask and you will be given, worry not, pray, learn to be quiet in the awesome presence of God, practice self-forgetting, practice, generosity, radical hospitality, lovingkindness, patience, practice, do not be anxious, practice tolerance, love...practice.

To the point, even, of the ultimate sacrifice. His was the ultimate example actualization, in the selfless act of his teachings and sacrifice. He taught us the practice of these teachings with his own life; and how powerful that is that today, 2000 years later that we still attempt guide and shape our lives and actions according to his practice.

Yesterday, I saw that here once again. At the memorial service for Pam Stiles, this church came together from its four (maybe five) corners, gathered itself up in all its parts, and created a symphony of actualization and practice that showered a family in their loss with love and hope and presence and much more than the sum of our parts could ever produce on its own. The practice of our belief about who we are here as a community, members of the Palisades Presbyterian Church and what that means to us as followers of the radical teachings of a first century felon - - enveloped us all – and we saw, again -- who we were -- because we had been taught to practice what we believed.

In Maslow's language, we were at the top or fulfilled level of our psychological development, a place that invites us to give what we have to others, to gain meaning in our lives by seeing what it is we have to give, and understanding who it is we have become in the way that it impacts and helps other in our lives. Amazing!

In its early Greek and Hebrew translation it is called hospitality – philoxenia – the love of strangers; the practice of nourishing and protecting travelers, often moving through hostile environments. It is a tradition throughout the First and Second Testaments. It is apropos today as then.

It is the story of Abraham, in Genesis 18:1 and following, when he rushes out of his tent to greet three strangers who approach him “in the heat of day.” When a feast is set before them, these unknown visitors reveal how God's promise concerning the son to be born of Sarah and Abraham is at long last approaching fulfillment. By conveying their message, the guests return a favor to their host, thus setting in motion a numinous or supernatural reciprocity which is typical of stories about fellowship in the ancient world.

It is the hospitality that is so often described in the ministry of Jesus as descriptions of the coming life to be a place of food and drink and with rooms enough for all. It is compared to a great banquet, over and again, a wedding, a feast -- with Jesus offering the final meal and the path in the last hours before his execution.

And so it was yesterday. It is the practice at its best, I think, of Christianity, when we give what we have been given to others with the heart and the minds that most certainly joins together as soul. Ever hear the term “soul food”?! That's what we had here yesterday and today. Soul food!

I received an email from someone who commented that I looked happy at the end of yesterday's memorial. I thought about that and I thought about everyone who was there, and even in the midst of the sadness and the loss of Pam reverberating for the Stiles family and Pam's friends, there were happy people all around – happy for having celebrated the life of one they loved; happy for this

church that gave such a gift to this family and being a part of that; and happy with the glow that comes from the practice of what we believe – but there's more, too.

And it is this, in everything we do here and in our lives, whether it is a day like yesterday or the gift of a smile to a stranger, we are not just giving away what we have been taught; we are giving away the idea of practicing what we have been taught to others, passing it forward, so to speak.

It's the idea of generativity, yes, but numinous reciprocity and multiplication, too and – more.

It is the practice, from here forward, of changing the world a little at a time by knowing and encouraging others to be steadfast in their attempts at all times, to know that it's in the practice of who we are that we can best know the promise, the joy, and the power to be of use by the One who has sent and calls us to this place, this family, and our neighbors.

It is a banquet. Soul food, indeed!

Amen.