

Palisades Presbyterian Church  
Palisades, New York  
August 24, 2008

Readings:  
Romans 12:1-8  
Matthew 16:13-20

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*Who do you say God is?*  
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I remember a time in my early twenties when I was really confused about God. Not like I am today, in a good way, I think – which I will talk about in a few minutes, but in a way that at the time made God very different than something deeply inside of me could completely recognize.

I started a practice then that continues today – I would have these long conversations with God, often sitting on a beach late at night, wondering why God would not appear, walk on water towards me, or do something to answer the “other” questions that were so perplexing in my life.

Just for an instant, I wanted God to show Godself – send one of those angels or another messenger. I wanted proof, even though I wouldn’t have admitted it. And, I’m a little embarrassed to say this, but more then and once in a while even now – I want something more than faith. You know, a simple appearance would do just fine.

After a while it all became too much to hold together. Yes, being gay had a lot to do with it. But I have talked with many who had debates with God and church, at the time used synonymously.

As I saw more and more what these restrictive teachings were doing to me and others, I wanted to shake everyone out of their mass acceptance of a God that punishes and separates. And, if you were not a male Caucasian in most religions of the time, you were separated from. Your role was often seen as one of sacrifice, accepting the burdens of your gender and race or condition, and conform – or leave.

It’s not that I wasn’t willing to accept my share of burden or sacrifice – it was just that I found that no degree of such servanthood seemed to make my life better. Shouldn’t it be better if I was sacrificing, conforming, accepting my burden?!

Well, it wasn’t and, in fact, attempts at imposed conformity nearly destroyed me, as it had many others to one degree or another, sometimes to the most extreme of degrees.

You know, I really wanted to believe – believe it all, from Moses to miracles. But I just couldn’t. And when I sought out answers from friendly and approachable leaders in the church, they would say with a wink and a nod – “just live according to your conscience and you’ll be fine.”

To tell you the truth, that messed me up even more. If you’re telling me God accepted and loved me as I was, then let’s tell everyone. That’s the Good News! Aren’t we supposed to be spreading the Good News?! Where’s the fairness, love, or justice in just a few of us knowing, when others are suffering from a lack of knowing?

Truthfully, It just kept getting worse and made less and less sense to me. Confusion led to near-despair, and ultimately – simply as an act of survival at some primal spiritual level – I left the church.

No indictment or indignation, I just needed to breathe. If God didn’t understand that, then it didn’t make any difference anyway.

I refer to the years that followed as my “desert time,” a place I sometimes revisit. I wasn’t there for forty years, but over nearly a decade I found solace and God in that place that somehow became a living setting of all that had been written and the one sanctuary of all creation. It was a wanderer’s place, with encounters of others on the same path along the way – but in many ways a personal and solitary place. I have to admit, there are times when nothing helps like sand between the toes.

Later, I discover that my so-called “maladjustment” to conditions was a good thing.

If we tilt Paul a little on the side for a different view, it may just be that he was talking about some of these same things. From this morning’s readings:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Is Paul saying, perhaps, that the living sacrifice requires sometimes that we give up what is comfortable, assured, even promised for certain behaviors?

And the conformity that he cautions embracing are echoed in the words of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he, too, cautions about the immense pressures for cultural conformity (including the church in one’s culture) a, “condition[ing] our minds and feet to move to the rhythmic drumbeat of the status quo.”

I have to tell you that the status quo drives me crazy. The last thing I want to become is “status quo,” and yet we can’t function without some things falling into this category of expectation and dependability. Again, I rely on Dr. King for the insight for which my words fall short:

“There are some things in our world to which men [sic] of goodwill must be maladjusted. I confess that I never intend to become adjusted to the evils of segregation and the crippling effects of discrimination, to the moral degeneracy of religious bigotry and the corroding effects of narrow sectarianism, to economic conditions that deprive men [sic] of work and food, and to the insanities of militarism and the self-defeating effects of physical violence.” - Dr. King’s Sermon *Transformed Nonconformist* January 1966

Or as Dan Cleneden says, “Christian non-conformity, in other words, has a specific direction.”

I think Paul would have understood this, even used the language. Paul is an exhorter, calling people to a new way of living – yes, to a new justice, to a renewed sense of the God of Israel, the God of the *Shema Yisrael* that would never have accepted anything less than hospitality for the stranger, a fundamental tenet of justice that is the root of love – or the other way around, if you prefer.

It should be noted that such reform ideas are incredibly powerful, and, as such – are met with strong resistance by those who prefer the status quo that favors one group (their group) over another.

Looking at my own life, if I were to draw a picture of it as a sphere, it would be constrained by my own human conditions, my shortcomings, and lack of patience, tolerance, love, and understanding – all those things that are held in place by the deep gravity of fear. And around that sphere there is another ring, like a ring of Saturn. The ring represents the growth away from self toward the other, forged by the struggles and the mistakes I have made and the kindness of others, and the grace of God. It is that edge, just a few millimeters from the surface of the sphere that has made and continues to make a difference in my life that gives it meaning. Much of that distance, for me, has been transversed in the desert.

And still, there are no “final answers” to the Big Question. Who is God?

I use the language of my tradition to talk about God, but every word is inherently limited, every word but a pointer to what cannot be described. The closest I get is “a presence that I know that guides me,” the same presence that I have heard about, witnessed in others, and read about throughout the Bible and other works.

It's much easier for me to answer, “Where is God?” Everywhere.

So, let's enter for a moment into the “God is Everywhere” place and consider Matthew's writings that Sue read for us this morning. First, let's remember that Matthew's writing is tending toward the high Christology of John, that is, his purpose is to secure Jesus as the Messiah in the eschatological sense of Judaism, not just as an anointed one, such as a prophet.

A look at Gospel Parallels shows just how Matthew has enhanced this passage from what was most likely a Markan original (written around 65-70CE), relying as well on the Lost Gospel of Q.

This reading in Matthew falls between the encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman, the feeding of the masses, and what follows in 16:21-28, the foreshadowing of the Passion of Jesus, in which Jesus rebukes Peter:

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’ But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

So, what is going on at Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asks the question, “Who do people say the Son of Man [this child of God] is?”

In the last few weeks, we spoke about Jesus growing into his ministry, learning more about his call. Any leader, spiritual or otherwise, listens to those around them for feedback, insight, criticism.

“What do people say, Peter?” “What do you say?”

Matthew adds several lines here not in the other gospels, but setting those aside for a minute or two, one wonders if Jesus thought to himself upon hearing the answers, “What is going on here? Could this be true? Is this what all these things have meant, what this journey is about? Is this that longing inside that refuses to go away, the absolute certainty I have about how things need to be changed and what is wrong and how everything has become so confusing and wrong from what God could ever have meant it to be? How has this tradition of Moses and Abraham been so turned on its head? Have I been called to do this, to set my face to Jerusalem based on this knowing that it is what I am supposed to do? Are these people calling me the messiah speaking to me from God, the Father, the Mother? What is going on?”

Oh, my God.

And when Jesus tells Peter not to say a word, maybe Jesus is just looking for some time to get to the desert or the mountaintop, to give this more thought and prayer.

"Quiet, Peter. Keep this to yourself. I need some time to understand what this means and what God is calling me to do."

God, who are you?

And then, in the next passages, when Jesus knows that there is danger and violence ahead that he needs to walk into, he rebukes Peter's contradiction by telling him in the terms of the day to "Be quiet and don't try to tempt me away from what I must do."

Jesus came to know, I believe, what he was called to do. More and more he is renewed in ways that raise him as a Messiah and for many as the Messiah.

Today, for me, this is the Jesus that sustains me – maybe you, too. It is the Jesus who came to know God perhaps as no other ever had, and in ways beyond my understanding, Jesus has become one with God and the Spirit. It is this "presence of God and Jesus and the Spirit" that is now everywhere for me, and I can't explain it any more, perhaps, than the Muslim, the Jew, the Native American, or believers in any tradition find their way to the God -- who I believe is One, beyond all the questions.

In the end, I know God in the feeble way I have tried to describe God. Considering that the struggle for God has been with us since creation I think I am not alone. And in the struggle and this place I have come to know God as a presence, yes – beyond all understanding and right here at my fingertips.

And, in the end, the peace and mystery come together out of a place of silence, which is also a place of grace. Perhaps no poet expresses this better than Rainer Maria Rilke:

From The Sonnets of Orpheus  
First Part 1

A tree ascended there. Oh pure transcendence!  
Oh Orpheus sings! Oh tall tree in the ear!  
And all things hushed. Yet even in that silence  
a new beginning, beckoning, change appeared/

Creatures of stillness crowded from the bright  
unbound forest, out of their lairs and nests;  
and it was not from any dullness, not  
from fear, that they were so quiet in themselves,

but from just listening. Bellow, roar, shriek  
seemed small inside their hearts. And where there had been  
at most a makeshift hut to receive the music,

a shelter nailed up out of their darkest longing,  
with an entryway that shuddered in the wind—  
you built a temple deep inside their hearing.

May that temple of grace and silence deep inside your hearing guide you well for the work you are called to do and the gifts you have been given to share. Amen.