

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
September 4, 2011
Sermon Series Part 3

RESTORATIVE LIFE: RECOVERING HUMILITY IN OUR HUMANITY

“Give me understanding that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.
Give me life in your ways”
Psalm 119: 34; 37

This morning concludes a three-part sermon series called Ordinary Time:
Discovering the Sacred in Everyday Life.

Throughout the summer and into the fall, this period in the church calendar is referred to by some as “ordinary time.” That said, I think it’s safe to say there is nothing necessarily “ordinary” in my mind about where we are right now in our common humanity as a nation or a globe. As one preacher aptly put it: “living in ordinary time means that we have not seen any burning bushes and have to be content to envision with our minds what our hearts cannot confer.” Despite our best efforts we live in that reality, day-by-day, moment-by-moment.

Both of the texts we have heard read this morning, one from the Psalms and the other from the gospel of Matthew do not make it necessarily any easier. How to do justice I wonder without echoing law to the exclusion of grace? These texts can be troubling for us 21st century modernists.

I repeat a little mantra from Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, whom I quoted in last Sunday’s sermon: the learning, it goes on forever. The author of Psalm 119 seems to put a high value on lifelong learning because this particular psalm (all 176 verses of it) is a carefully constructed comprehensive ode to a path for life, an open door waiting to be explored. The verses that Katherine read for us speak of a desire for greater understanding in this process of exploration, of living in God’s way, of discovering the sacred. “Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. Give me life in your ways.” It asks us to resist reducing law to a simple set of edicts – there is more substance there than meets the eye.

As we have learned through these past weeks with the help of contemporary teachers like Barbara Brown Taylor and Lyanda Lynn Haupt, studying and living in God’s way engages the whole person and all of life, above and beneath the earth. We construct altars in the world when we can give our whole selves creatively and imaginatively to such a path. The results perhaps include a greater depth for life, a peace and contentment that cannot be destroyed by life’s circumstances.

In an age characterized by a constant barrage of information, options and

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distractions, to cultivate wholeheartedness is indeed a challenge. Yet as Judith Shulevitz and Nicholas Carr helped us consider, it is a challenge that offers greater balance to life, a sense of purpose and of grounding.

This morning we end with the notion of *restorative life, recovering humility in our humanity*, where along with the psalmist, Noah Levine and Paul Harding help us see that the longing to give one's heart, mind and soul to something beyond one's own existence is a common and deep desire, albeit a difficult one.

Many of us I suspect would agree that much emphasis is given in our time to happiness. Advertising, along with social media, both uses and encourages the notion that personal happiness should be raised up as life's ultimate goal. Money, fame, technology and a host of more mundane things available in a consumption and material driven society can reach that goal – at least this is what is promised by those promoting products or driving super-achievement.

There's no secret that much of what has been illuminated in this sermon series has been countercultural and in a most countercultural fashion, the psalmist today also speaks of finding happiness, not as life's highest priority, but rather as a by product of pursuing the understanding of God's law. Rather, the freeing discipline of such study and the reordering of life afford new and different depths of joy, perhaps even bringing us closer to more relevance and ultimately toward God. Do we want to find greater happiness? This is where another **h** word may come in handy – humility: adopt a modest or lower view of yourself and refrain from focusing solely on the self. All of this is simply an invitation from the psalmist for us to reclaim what is good, instructive, and redemptive and yes, restorative by virtue of the law.

And speaking of it not being about ourselves, Matthew's gospel – a difficult text that does not make much sense in a culture where faith communities are often a place of self sufficient individuals who gather and then leave to carry on with their own thing throughout the week – reminds us of rather a higher principle of both interdependence and reconciliation, which includes the care and responsibility to forgive, even when injured or offended. More so, the demands of forgiveness do also suggest thorough attention to the demanding care of repentance – without such, it risks passive if not outright violence to the injured.

As we approach the 10th anniversary of September 11, 2001, the late Rev. Peter Gomes, chaplain to Harvard University reminds us that “perhaps the greatest tragedy of that fateful day and the life we have come to live in its aftermath, is not the loss of the human lives or buildings, terribly tragic and horribly painful they are to recall.” “Rather,” he writes, “the greatest tragedy may be that we have

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since been programmed to live by our fears and not by our hopes. Compassion and fear do not go together. Once a people defined by our compassions, now more and more a people defined by our fears. Political gurus tell us that the party that best plays to our fears and promises to allay them is the party that will prevail in the polls.”

Ten years later, based on what I consider is our absurd and obscene political paralysis and rhetoric, living in fear is no way for a mature, civil society to flourish. How I wish it could be other than it is, and I suspect many of you do too.

There are many examples to learn from. Peter Gomes writes in *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*: – “white Christians in the American south feared the black slaves whom some of them genuinely loved and out of that fear constructed a society based on slavery.” That fear was made manifest toward Martin Luther King, Jr., who now is enshrined in a tall monument in Washington DC, who turned his energies toward a wider and greater good social order. “The contemporary fear still gripping America – though we have made considerable strides – appears to be the fear of the gay agenda. It is a strange pathology indeed – fear that the sexual identity and practices of a minority will somehow taint the identity and practices of the majority. This irrational fear of the sexual other is all the more dangerous because it conceals itself within the sanctions of religion. And in our fear of terror and terrorists we are often tempted to resort to the very tactics we fear and despise in our adversaries. How easily, writes Gomes, we become the prisoner of our own fears and hold hostage our own principles. Fear is no policy – it represents the absence of courage and a poverty of imagination.”

And, I contend, it cannot, must not, be the end of the story.

I suppose this is largely why I chose to conclude this series as I am today to remind myself and you that there is, has, and must be some good news to yet proclaim and to exemplify. That the opposite of fear is not courage but compassion. Along with compassion, kindness and humility leave no room for fear. We are too busy doing what we can, what we must and what God hopes us to do to take time to fear the consequences. These are all attributes that Peter Gomes, Noah Levine, Barbara Brown Taylor, Judith Shulevitz and many others consider to be the exercise of an inner strength that allow us some power, some resolve, some resilience in the face of powerlessness and even the powers that be. In particular, I realize now that the good news that Jesus was known to proclaim always calls us beyond conventional wisdom and into dangerous, uncharted waters. It is why so much that we have discovered and thought about this past few weeks has evoked the phrase countercultural. The good news is

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not back there somewhere, but out front awaiting us. As all of us consider now and in the days to come how we ought to live in this anything but ordinary time, less than friendly world, when we wonder on whom and what we may rely, perhaps we might find some hope, some strength indeed in the restorative powers of compassion, kindness and humility. John F. Kennedy once said: “one person can make a difference, and everyone must try.”

So, I leave you with this – that is the story of Kim Rosen, author of *Saved by a Poem*. In 2008 she invested all of her savings in a small, local fund. Two months later, a friend who had told her about the fund left her a message. “Bernard Madoff was arrested today. The fund was a fraud. We lost everything.” As she stood there clutching the phone, she knew there were a thousand things she needed to do. Contact her lawyer and her accountant, figure out how to pay bills she accrued when she thought she had the money –not to mention rent, food, and health insurance. But all she could think to do was Google kindness. This poem by Naomi Shihab Nye became the prayer that carried her in the days and months that followed:

Before you know what kindness really is you must lose things, feel the future dissolve in a moment like salt in a weakened broth. What you held in your hand what you counted and carefully saved, all this must go so you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of kindness. Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow, you must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth. Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore, only kindness that ties your shoes and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread, only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say:

It is I you have been looking for, and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.