

Spiritual Food: Sermons

*O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.*
(Psalm 63:1)

Sermon by Jane Larsen-Wigger
Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church
Reformation Sunday
October 26, 2008

Deuteronomy 34:1-12
Psalm 90:1-6, 12-17
Matthew 22:36-40

This is one of those very full Sundays – We're baptizing Isabel Husk. Sending Stephanie Gregory off to Guatemala on our behalf. Hearing about stewardship. And, somewhere in it all, giving a nod to our Reformed Heritage on this 'Reformation Sunday.'

But, let me say first that I realized all of that--baptism, mission, stewardship, being Reformed--is all held together around one basic theme: Identity. Which, I think, is why we come here at all, why we gather as a community each week:

We gather to remember who we are.

This is especially important during anxious times like these. It's not just important, but essential, that we remember that our identity runs deeper than what our credit history shows. We are not just consumers. We are not just what our job title—or lack of one—describes. We are not just Republicans or Democrats. We are not first and foremost even Americans. And our worth is not the same as our latest 401K statement.

When identity is wrapped up in such things then when they are threatened, WE are threatened. So, especially during anxious times, it is important to remember who we are. And the voice of a flight attendant echoes in my ears:

I told you all this story right after we got back from our mission trip to Guatemala in the summer of 2007 where 19 CHPCers of all ages - 16 to 60 - had gone. I was thinking of it again this week, because we are sending Stephanie back to Guatemala on our behalf. Anyway...it was the last leg of a long trip. We had been together, pretty much constantly, for nine days of traveling, working, praying, enjoying one another's company, getting on each others' nerves, sharing a life-changing experience. On that last leg we were all seated together in the middle of the plane. And we were tired. Just a bit punchy. And very comfortable with one another. And, I'm just guessing here, a little loud and unruly?

Anyway...the flight attendant came mid-way down the aisle to do his safety spiel and stood right there between Stephanie and me. He looked around at our motley crew and looked at us and said, "Who ARE you people anyway?" "We're a group of Presbyterians on a mission trip," Stephanie said.

I think that scene and that answer sum up pretty well our identity. Not just those 19 on that one trip. But all of us, always -- We are a group of Presbyterian Christians on a mission trip. We are a group. A community. To be a Christian necessarily makes one a part of the Body of Christ. There's no lone-ranger job description in the discipleship handbook. One is baptized into community. And that means that we're going to be more fully who we are called to be if we stick together – find a particular finger or toe of the Body of Christ to be a part of and travel with that group.

And we're Presbyterians – a particular (and reformed) brand of Christians. That means a lot of things. But for starters it means our roots are deep in the rich loam of grace. Before we have chosen or done anything to earn God's favor, God has chosen us. Made a covenant with us. It is not because of what WE do but because of what God does. And this gets to that mission piece: God claims us and saves us – for God's purpose. So, it's never just about me and Jesus.

It's all for the purpose of something bigger – God's hopes for the transformation of the world.

At the retreat last weekend a few of the youth led one of the reflection times. They had us thinking about actual mission trips we had gone on and what value there was in them. The way they asked the question helped me realize that what I have consistently found powerful about taking a mission trip with a group of church folks is a two-fold thing: one is the importance of being together. Of having that kind of time with one another. There really is nothing like riding in a van, preparing and eating meals together, working on a common project, sharing a profound experience to really help you start to understand what community is - or can be -about. So, just being together, getting to know one another better, getting good practice in loving one another. That's a really valuable piece.

But the other is, almost the other end of the spectrum: how one's world is opened up so much. Especially when engaged with another culture, even if that culture is just across the state, inevitably one gets the sense of something so much bigger than us and our concerns and opinions and ways of doing things. It's like you get a glimpse into the vastness of all that is, and recognize the holiness.

The last several weeks we've been tracking the journey of the Hebrew people from their life as slaves in Egypt, their liberation through the Red Sea, their wanderings in the desert. They were headed to the place God had promised their ancestors. A land of milk and honey. That was their mission -- to get there where they would become a new nation, a new people. It almost seems like the "mother of all mission trips!" Talk about lots of time to be together, lots of opportunities to develop a sense of community, lots of practice in learning to love one's neighbor.

And then, finally, after 40 years on the road, there Moses stands – at the top of a mountain, looking out over the plains as far as the eye can see. The land of promise. A scene of vast openness – a glimpse at least of the vastness of God's mercy. The world was opened up for him – all that he only hoped for before was in sight. His life and purpose were put in perspective. But, Moses must have had a sense of that before.

Psalm 90 that we read is a prayer attributed to Moses. A prayer that talks about everlasting to everlasting – about the vastness of time and space – and then the place of humans in that. Here we are – living lives no longer than a blink, no bigger than a speck of dust.

Nothing like the view looking down from the top of a mountain or up into a star-studded night sky; nothing like hearing about dinosaur dance floor billions of years old or walking on fossils at the falls of the Ohio. Such experiences give one a sense of the vastness of time and space. And help us to see ourselves in that perspective – a blink in the scheme of things, a speck of dust.

And yet we dare to believe that these little blinks, these tiny specks that are human lives, are meaningful. That God has called us, drawn us together, to be a part of God's mission of love and justice that is moving all of creation closer to the Promised land.

Indeed, blinks and specks that we are, somehow God intends for our life together to matter, for the work of our hands to prosper, for our lives to be full of joy and gladness.

I asked Kate and Ian why they wanted to have Isabel baptized. They know there is nothing magical about the water we pour on her head. They know this little ritual is not going to insure that Isabel won't experience—or create—heartache. But they do believe that there is something powerful in her growing up knowing that she is part of a community of faith. A part of something bigger than herself, than her family. A place where she can know she is loved and get some good practice herself at learning to love. A community to travel with on a journey of meaning and purpose.

They want her in a place where week after week, people come together to admit where they have fallen short, how they have forgotten that they belong to God. And then, in the silence that follows, those same people hear water splashing into a bowl and listen for the echo of grace resounding across the eons. They look carefully and see through that water to the watery chaos at the beginning of time as well as the river of life at the end. And then those people look around at one another and remember who they are: children of the covenant – a group of Presbyterian Christians on a mission trip.

"Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands –
O prosper the work of our hands!" Ps. 90:17