

Trust in God
Luke 18:9-14, Ezekiel 36:22-32
Pastor Mark Greiner ©

September 25, 2016
Final Sermon
Takoma Park Presbyterian Church

Do any of you know the words of “the Jesus prayer?” (If so, please share it out loud.)

It sounds a lot like the Gospel story today, when the tax collector prays:
“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

The Jesus prayer is dear to the hearts of our Eastern Orthodox brothers and sisters.

And the prayer is the centerpiece of one of the great American pieces of literature, the novella “Franny and Zooey” by J.D. Salinger. If you wanted one reading to challenge and deepen your prayer life, “Franny and Zooey” would be a good place to start.

The prayer is meant to be said repeatedly, throughout the day, throughout one’s life to follow Paul’s admonition to “pray without ceasing.”
 The prayer aims to dissolve the ego within the heart of God.

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

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What prayer turns your heart to God, again and again and again?

Now this is the last sermon I will preach. It’s taken me four sermons to say goodbye. This is the last of the four.

This sermon is short and focused. If you could condense your witness-- your message about how you know the Good News made known in Jesus Christ -- to others, what would you say?

Two weeks ago, we spoke of planting hope. And named that hope is a verb. Hope is something we do. Even if we do not feel hope, we can be hope for others through what we do in the world.

But hope is also a noun. And hope arises in relationship, relationship with God.

There are two great paths to God, to transformation.
They are great love and great suffering.

Perhaps should be on the title of the Bible, that Book of books.
"The Book of the Lovers and the Heartbroken."

Perhaps that would be the clue to reading any particular text: to ask, how did this passage arise – from what great love or from what great heartbreak? Reading the Bible that way may move us more fully into our own deep love and our own deep suffering.

In a marriage that endures, the couple has the thrill and rush of romantic love. That can last long, one hopes it does! And yet as the days pass, there is also hardship. A couple realizes disappointment, even heartbreak. All that was dreamed will not be realized. The reality overtakes the dream. And disillusionment sets in.

And yet disillusionment is a blessing.
Pastor, how can disillusionment be a blessing?
The word means "to lose one's illusions."
Then, a deeper love can be realized. The dreamed-of person can no longer be loved, but the real, live flesh and blood person can be, with the limitations and imperfections that are the common lot of humanity. That's the foundation for an enduring love.

Similarly, hoping in God arises. Have you noticed that often it's the broken-hearted who are the most faithful people.

Suffering can destroy a person; all too often, it does.
But it is possible that when all else has failed, even the dreamed-of God fails, the reality of God can emerge: a realistic love.

As Alan Boesak said of South African Christians in the long, terrible struggle with apartheid, they discovered that heaven had not failed them yet.

So the sermon word today “hope in God” is less a command than naming a possibility.

It really is possible to hope in God. Especially once disillusioned. As the prophet Ezekiel said to a devastated people, speaking as if with God’s voice:

“A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you.”

We may truly hope in God.

Hope arises not from our efforts, but the reality of God.

I’m thankful for living in Takoma Park for decade and being part of a progressive church. And yet, if not a sin at least a distortion of liberal Christianity is the sense that now the kingdom of God is up to us. “Thanks Jesus, but we’ve got it from here.” We may not even know we’re doing it. Yet experience the kind of hope we’re talking about today is to drink from the deep well, from the water of life.

And if we experience that hope, then imagine what becomes possible for our life in the world!

Poet Naomi Shihab Nye says “Your Life Is a Poem” (*from the On Being website, July 28, 2016 interview, <http://www.onbeing.org/program/naomi-shihab-nye-your-life-is-a-poem/8720>*)

Growing up, she lived in Ferguson, Missouri – yes, that Ferguson Missouri, where Michael Brown was killed by a police officer in August, 2014. She grew up in Ferguson near where her Lutheran mother had grown up.

She also grew up on the road between Ramallah in the West Bank and Jerusalem. Her father was a refugee, Palestinian journalist, and a Muslim.

Through her poetry, she carries forward his hopeful passion, his insistence, that language must be a way out of cycles of animosity.

Her journey “in-between”, in-between countries and in-between faiths, has fostered a remarkably compassionate vision.

The poem I’m about to read was inspired on her honey-moon, travelling in Colombia. At the end of the first week of a planned 3-month trip, she and her husband were robbed. A fellow passenger on their bus was killed in that attack. And yet, complete strangers opened their hearts to them. And so she wrote this poem that day.

These are last sermonic words I will speak to you.
And often worship today, my public voice will silence.

I will fall deeply silent, to listen more deeply for God, listen more deeply to my life, and through my acupuncture studies, listen more deeply to human bodies.

God can indeed speak through other people, and yet sometimes one needs the utter solitude of silence to hear God speak.

3 points from the sermon today:

- #1 Prayer: **“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”**
– that my heart may melt within the heart of God.
- #2 Hope: Hope in God.
- #3 Live, as suggested by this poem, named “Kindness” (Naomi Shihab Nye)

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.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

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 every where
like a shadow or a friend.

Amen.