

## **Pastor Roy's Sermon from Oct. 14, 2012**

Readings: Amos 5:6,7, 10-15, Ps. 90:12-17, Hebrews 4:12-16, Mark 10:17-31

Children's lesson:

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Why do we gather on Sunday mornings? Because it's a good habit? To meet God? To see one another? To learn? To be entertained? To become better people? To worship? To consider the meaning of life and answers to life's persistent questions? Because we would feel guilty if we didn't? Because our pay check depends on it? (for Dawn/Judy and me). We gather for many reasons.

A poet, Annie Dillard, gathers with a local congregation to meet God. Though she might be content worshipping alone she intentionally seeks out God in the presence of others at the closest church to her home. She writes about meeting God, and suggests that we should wear helmets and the ushers should hand out life preservers and signal flares because of the seriousness of our intentions. We know that God is present in all places and at all times. But we come to expect to find God in particular ways in particular places. Such as this building. Such as the grand canyon? Have you stopped to revel in the presence of an old tree? I must confess I do not recall being properly present when I stood beside an ancient sequoia in California 25 years ago, but there are trees around here which, if I am mindful, powerfully communicate the life of God. Storms, sunrise, sunset, a starry sky, clouds, an unmown field in early fall with all its creatures, these also communicate to us the life of God.

Many choose to meet with God in the presence of others. One of the things that stands out about our liturgical tradition is that the shape and content of our worship has been influenced by the gathering of the saints for the past 2000 years, not quite as old as some trees, but a respectable time frame for forming worship habits. When we worship publicly in this way, we are joining our voices to those of saints who have come and gone, even long ago, in many and distant lands.

The central physical space of our worship is the altar. I am reminded by the Orthodox tradition that the altar is a place of ongoing worship, regardless of whether there is scheduled worship taking place. Many observe at these altars the worship of saints who have were bodily present in the past, but also other saints who have never been bodily present at this altar. Physical presence is direct, but there are presences of which we are not aware. Dew forming in the evening. Sun causing photosynthesis in leaves. The strength we receive from long distance friends and family. There is much more to life than what we see with our eyes, hear with our ears, taste with our mouths and touch with our skin.

There is a spiritual reality into which the Spirit of Jesus Christ guides us by his teaching and healing ministry, by his death and resurrection. Our Lord is present in this place at the altar, and so are the saints. The altar is the focal point. There is plenty going on here. God gives us creativity to conceive of what truly is. In our faith, we do not imagine what is not, but together, we perceive what is. Those who reverence the altar do so remembering the presence of God and the cloud of witnesses who join us in this place. We are never alone. We are always surrounded by friends, by our Lord. So when we gather together, our faith is strengthened. We are reminded that we are not alone and that our God is calling us, unmistakably into this moment, if we are able to listen in the moment. We gather to place ourselves intentionally within the gaze of the eternal creator, mover, sustainer.

The prophets weighed in on Israel's worship from time to time. If Israel got carried away in some practice or lifestyle, the prophets reminded them of what is most important. Here Amos can balance this message about how we worship God together. True worship must be accompanied by justice and mercy. In our language of altars and the presence of God and God's people, the true altar is a passion to "Hate evil, love good, establish justice. It may be that the Lord will be gracious." If our lifestyles, our work, our play, and our relationships lack justice, then the altar and this building are filled with grief and we are full of folly. Without sharing in God's justice, our worship is hollow and meaningless. We can think of justice as a cooperation with God's grace. God is gracious because God is truly just. God is just because God is gracious. There is no separating justice and grace. As we believe in the grace of God, we practice it in our lives to the best of our ability.

The freedom we receive from God's justice becomes freedom to live in that justice. At times it's a struggle. We forget. We have difficult days. We have been scarred by those who failed to practice justice and mercy in our past.

We must come to terms with injustices done us in the past—but ultimately, healing comes in embracing God's overarching grace toward us and those who have injured us in the past. Grace is always victorious. Injustice is a woundedness which is overcome by mercy. Debts are cancelled. Love wins. That is another reason we gather. We need to be reminded by living saints what it means to hate evil, love good and establish justice. Our hope is in God's grace. And then we will still fail at times. We grow weary and our faith is challenged. The Good News is that faith is a celebration of God's mercy with a growing mercy of our own.

As the rich young ruler walks away downcast, Jesus says, how hard it is for the wealthy, or anyone for that matter, to enter the kingdom of God. So many voices. So many distractions. So many impulses. Peter then says, "But...Jesus...we have left everything and followed you..." Jesus responds, "Yes, you and all who have sacrificed for the cause of God's justice, without exception, will overcome and be blessed 100 times over. One hundred times over. But it takes eyes of faith to see this overwhelming mercy. Disciplined eyes of faith. Today is the day to see with true vision.

Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first. God give us strength to let go of those things to which we so desperately cling when they prevent us from both experiencing and sharing God's abundance. Our starting point is God's mercy and justice, not whether or not we practice it. Therein lies the key to loving ourselves and everyone else with life giving justice and mercy. Amen.