

**TOGETHER WE GROW: THE DESIRE TO PLEASE GOD; HEBREWS 10:15-18, MARK 13:1-8; NOVEMBER 15, 2009; THOMAS H. YORTY, WPC**

We've been talking about our blessings here at Westminster. The leadership of women; the life of the mind and education; the gift of children; bold mission and service.

Today, I would like to hold up before us our ministry of spiritual life. Elizabeth Robinson said there is an inward journey – the life of the spirit; and an outward journey – the life of action and service. The inward journey is the foundation for the outward journey, our action in the world.

Why? Because our inner, spiritual life is where we discern God's intention for our actions. Inward life by itself is little more than navel gazing; outward life by itself can become scattered and pointless.

I'll never forget meeting a young man in Washington, D.C. who had an MBA and helped organize a non-profit, low-income housing project. They started the program when parts of DC were gentrifying and poor people could no longer afford to live in the city where they were employed.

The man was an active member of the Church of the Savior in Washington. In addition to being the brains behind Jubilee Housing he was the custodian of the large apartment, co-op building.

It seemed odd that a man with that kind of talent would be content to sweep floors but he told us that that is exactly where he discerned he was needed to help build community as he changed light bulbs and repaired broken windows. He said, "I wouldn't last five minutes in this work if I didn't feel this is where God wanted me to be."

It is a basic tenet of our faith that God calls us to bring about the kingdom in specific ways. There are lots of things we could do with the human and material resources we have – but we trust that God knows best how and where to use us.

WECP and WEDI were started and grew out of a collective effort at discerning the needs of the community and how God was calling Westminster to respond.

You can see how important it is for a church to develop its interior life, to equip members to discern the presence of God in their lives, in their life together and in the life of the community.

We are lucky to have a dedicated Spiritual Life Committee, chaired by Elder Jenny Wood and supported by our Parish Associate for Spiritual Life, Dr. Trevor Watt.

Maybe you've noticed or attended some of their Sunday morning programs that range from discussing the work of people like Henri Nouwen to discovering your creative voice to Presbyterianism 101. They've organized programs for couples, for older adults; and retreats with outside leaders.

But since we are also talking through these weeks about transformation as a congregation I'd like to step back for a moment and consider the bigger picture for cultivating spiritual life in a mainline church. Today's readings are both challenging and reassuring.

First, two comments: one about the religious marketplace, and one about language. We live in an incredibly diverse religious world. Right in this building we house a Zen meditation community and partner with Jews and Muslims in education and service.

Beyond that there are a range of religious voices: some kindred spirits, some not. There are mega churches and conservative churches and progressive churches. There are evangelicals, Pentecostals, orthodox, Unitarians and New Age.

Add to that a powerful secular spirit: the notion that God talk and God people have a right to exist but dare not impose their views on anyone. We've honored that principle in our nation but also managed sometimes to go to ridiculous extremes seeking to cleanse public language and spaces of the natural religious heritage, symbols and rituals that come with them.

So on the one hand we have this rich stew of religious views and voices seeking for the most part not to step on one another's toes but on the other hand, our ability to express our differences has never been so impaired.

What I am talking about is our language. Until about 1870 western society honored a contract between the word and world – which was a basic trust in the say-ability of the world. We listened and responded to one another with confidence in the ability of our words to describe the world.

But after 1870 that contract was irrevocably broken. Take the Bible, although I'm not talking about religious language alone. In the early 1900s a group of people called fundamentalists started latching onto the specific words themselves as expressing the literal meaning of the Bible. But anyone who had a high school science course knew that forcing the old contract back into place was a losing game.

Put them together – the diversity of religious voices and the eroding of words to describe shared human experience and we are left with a situation not unlike the Tower of Babel.

Not to mention that every day we are assaulted by words intended to influence, and even manipulate us, and separate us from our cash. The volume of words between our email, voice-mail, snail mail and the 24/7 media from the breakfast table to the car to the office to the gym to the evening news is numbing.

We are beset by more words than we can process much less respond to. They are words sent and spoken by loved ones and hucksters and everyone in between. They are bolded, underlined, italicized and sometimes come in red with pictures of hungry children, abused animals and polluted rivers.

What's a mainline church to do? Much of the language in mainline churches is about church growth, outreach, renewal and denominational initiatives. Many of those churches are losing members, and cannot afford language that might put people off.

People do not want to hear about sin and repentance for example. People want to hear about grace and forgiveness, although it is hard to imagine what those words might mean apart from the somber reality of sin.

So the challenge we face when it comes to talking about the life of the Spirit is first just getting through all the words and then using words that will carry some meaning and relevance for the intended audience.

Shift with me to this morning's Scripture. The story from Mark takes place just before Jesus' arrest. In these brief verses the disciples go from gawking at the glories of human structures to wanting to know when God will establish the new, permanent structure.

Jesus' comment is shocking. He says the Temple, the religious-industrial complex of his time and all of the power and control it evoked in the lives of the people would be utterly destroyed.

The scene then shifts from the steps of the Temple to the Mt. of Olives from which they can see the Temple in the distance. The disciples are eager to know when this will happen. Be patient, Jesus says, learn to discern the signs of the times. No one knows but God when these things will occur. Do not be alarmed; they mark the beginning of a new age.

If you consider the history of the church from the Reformation to the Protestant church in America in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries to the church today this is a familiar pattern.

Like the Temple in Jesus' time, the church through history and in our time seems to have a knack for losing sight of its mission. So old forms implode and new forms take their place—this includes everything from ecclesiastical structures to theological language. Through it all God drives the process and some, says St. Paul, will be like midwives assisting this transformation.

But how can we be midwives if we cannot perceive that the patient is about to give birth but are enamored with the power and status or glorious appearance of the patient before she goes into labor?

There is irony here. Despite all of the religious fervor, programming, and solicitation on the airwaves and internet there is probably more spiritual hunger now than ever.

Many people are not finding spiritual sustenance—partly because the old structures, the doctrines and liturgies are not connecting. I have been enlightened by both very new members and members of long standing who've told me that such basic terms as "spiritual journey" or "the Trinity" have little if any meaning for them. Or the meaning those phrases do have is shrouded by earlier negative experiences in the church.

You see there is a profoundly challenging task that underlies our spiritual life as a congregation. And the challenge is this: to find ways to connect with each other at the level of our interior life with language we can understand and worship and spiritual practices that speak to our experience of life and our longing for God.

The danger we face is the natural tendency of the church to avoid change, live in the past, and perpetuate what is familiar.

We can't change for change's sake but we can make meaningful changes and conduct fruitful experiments to deepen and grow in our ministry if we can communicate

with one another about where we struggle day to day; where we long for God and how we believe God can use us to repair the world.

If we can connect with one another at that level we will be nurturing a healthy congregation. If we can't find our way into those conversations we and the Presbyterian Church will go the way of Solomon's Temple.

But it's not called the Good News for nothing. The reading from Hebrews today recalls the prophet Jeremiah who said one day God's people will no longer need tablets of stone for God will write his law upon their hearts.

That's the promise. That if we aim to please God and not just prop up the old institution, even when the stakes are high and not a few churches are dying, God will speak to us at the core of our being. We will know God's purpose and direction in our bones, in our gut, and in our hearts.

It's the desire to please God that gives life and sparkles through everything we do. Even though some of our efforts may not work or be misguided the desire to please God will keep us in touch with one another and God herself. We have been blessed in many ways here at Westminster. But perhaps our greatest blessing is the desire of members of this church over the years and today to please God. Thomas Merton said an honest desire to please God can change the world. Amen.