

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for October 18, 2009
Lessons: Deuteronomy 8:11-18, Colossians 3:12-15, and Luke 5:15-16

FINDING THE STRENGTH

We tried first to discern the mood of people in our land as well as in the church. Individuals, of course, have many moods, and we certainly do not all feel the same way at the same time. On a Sunday morning such as this, some of us are bound to be happy while others are sad; some will be experiencing relief even as others feel their distress increasing. Even so, I think it is realistic to talk about a general mood that comes over a church, a workplace, a community, and even a nation. When I say “we” tried to discern the current mood, I am talking about our church’s Stewardship Team as we were seeking a theme for this year’s pledge drive. No, this is not a stewardship sermon, at least not in the narrow sense of pledging financial support for our life and ministry as a church, although I would not apologize if it were, but now that we are engaged in the visioning process, each thing we do as a church gets connected with everything else.

What, then, is the general mood in the land? If we watch television, we see plenty of anger, abundant fear, and more than a little resentment, but those emotions grab air time because they rant and shout a lot. Cooler heads seem to be waiting, just waiting to see what happens next. Companies would like to hire, but they hold off. The Dow is up, but employment still down, and so we wait, and many plans and dreams get put on hold. Waiting, however, is not all of one kind, and I think it’s fair to say the general mood these days is one of *anxious waiting*. The better kind, expectant waiting, has energy and contained excitement eager to burst forth. Anxious waiting saps our energy. When we expect something good and are eager for its arrival, we like to think about it, talk about it, and get ready for it. We act almost as though it has already arrived. We clear space for it in our minds and in our lives. When our dreams get postponed indefinitely, we do not care to talk much about them; instead, we escape by numbing our minds or taking flights of fantasy. Expectant waiting brings us together; anxious waiting keeps us apart as individuals retreat into isolation. Who, after all, wants to explain yet again that, no, there are no prospects out there?

You, no doubt, have sat in traffic jams expecting in time to see an accident, a construction site, or some bottleneck that explained why the cars were not moving forward. Most times you eventually discover the cause of the jam, but not always. Sometimes there is no apparent reason except no one was moving. Have you ever wondered as you sat in the

long line of cars and trucks what would happen if everyone just started moving forward very slowly, then a little faster? But, no, that doesn't happen. Nobody starts moving again until the vehicle immediately in front moves, and sometimes not even then, at least not very promptly. Life, of course, is much more complex than a traffic jam, but it does seem to me that a great many people, businesses, and probably churches are waiting for somebody else to start moving again. But we are not waiting eagerly; we are waiting anxiously, which drains us of readiness to go forward.

One member of the Stewardship Team asked, "Would it be too much to combine faith and hope in one theme?" Well, I don't know if the combination is catchy in the advertising sense, but I believe that potent combination of trust with hope is just what we need to gain the strength to get moving, living, and serving with renewed energy and purpose. We need to get out of our slump. The question is, How?

One of our Visioning Team members made the observation the other night that people look to God when they are scared but may forget God when their fear has passed. The Bible agrees, and just such forgetting God when times are no longer rough is what Deuteronomy warns against. Yes, people do "get religion" in prison, and the old saw contends with some truth, "There are no atheists in foxholes." But not all negative emotions move people to get up on Sunday morning and come here to join us in worship. If I don't want to answer questions about how I am doing, I may just roll over and stay in bed. Even so, I think our Visioning Team member made a useful point. Faith as medicine kept on the shelf until I feel sick does not strengthen me for normal living when I'm back on my feet. Neither does occasional hope generate a life filled with hopeful thinking, doing, and striving. Occasional hope is a bit like the occasional exercise and diet control I might try when I feel my belt getting tight, but as soon as the well-worn notch feels comfortable again, the exercise and diet control lapse. Fear is not enough. The distress of the moment may turn me to God, but faith is the effort of a lifetime.

The truth is that faith and hope work hand in hand, and by faith I do not mean a set of beliefs *about* God but our *trust in* God's redemptive love, care, and guidance. Hope comes from believing a promise. By nature, we feel hopeful when life looks promising, but if we cultivate that hope all the time by setting our sights on the promises of God, we will continue be hopeful even when life does not appear promising and our ways forward seem blocked. Our hope needs to be based in trust, not gratification. We need to find life in trusting God and learning to want what God wants for this world and its people, as Jesus teaches and shows us what it is God wants. He came to us proclaiming the approach of the kingdom of God, which is the reign on earth of God's redemptive love. That's our great hope: that God's love will reclaim this world, changing the nature and conditions of human

life. It is insufficient for me to hope for my own fulfillment, apart from Jesus' great promise of a new kind of world.

I think a good way to start is by cultivating thankfulness, and I don't mean just counting our blessings, although reciting the good rather than the bad may help. I mean consciously receiving life as God's gift each day and expecting God to show us how to make the day we are given matter, not on our terms, but on God's terms. I have become convinced that happiness is derived from thankfulness. No matter how much I possess, I will not be happy with it until I am thankful for life. I suspect this practiced gratitude for life is what the apostle means by telling us to be thankful, to make our own general mood in life to be thankfulness. I don't buy the silver lining theory that, I think, too often glosses over painful wrongs, especially when someone else is suffering them. There are some evils that happen to people for which it is not possible to be thankful and still be sane. But if we live with a general, practiced mood of thankfulness, then we will deal with the good and the bad with greater strength. We will not call evil good or attribute to God or God's will the wrongs that come from nature's apparent randomness or from human wrongdoing. God redeems evils we suffer and brings good out of them, but we do not need to thank God for the evils themselves, which would be a bit like thanking the surgeon for the tumor she removed. We need to be honest if we are going to cultivate genuine thankfulness and not just put on a smiley-face attitude that hides pain but hides from it, as well.

Cultivating thankfulness is a good start, but it's not enough for a finish. God did not create us for ourselves, and thankful living cannot endure if it remains selfishly focused only on my own needs and desires. True gratitude to God leads, not only to deeper and stronger trust in God's love and care, but also to compassion for others and concern for the greater welfare of the human community. Self-centered faith quickly becomes a corrupting attempt to use God for my own purposes, and God will not be used. Hope for my life and the life of my family, if it is truly to come from the promises of God as we have them from Jesus, must be part and parcel of hope for my neighbors and for the world of people. It can't be just me and mine. Jesus does not call his disciples to a personal spirituality that merely calms their fears and seeks personal blessings; he calls them to learn to care so they can learn to minister and serve, that others might be blessed. Jesus went off by himself to pray, and we need to do the same. Then he went back to people with renewed strength to minister to them.

Some years ago, we tried one of those pitchers that filters tap water through charcoal, and it worked fine as long as we didn't let the purified water sit too long. If we made that mistake, we soon found green slime forming inside the pitcher. The purified water needed to be poured out. Hope is like that. What people call spirituality is like that, too. If I try to keep it inside myself, green slime starts to form. Besides, hope cultivates well only when put into service for the sake of God's redemptive love for people. Amen.