

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for November 2, 2008
Lessons: Isaiah 58:3-12 and Philippians 4:1-14

FAITH IN A TIME OF CONSTRICTION

Let's start with two brief segments of poetry. The first from 1919 in the aftermath of World War I, comes from William Butler Yeats. But before I read it, picture a gyroscope. I had one for a toy when I was a child. Now picture a "widening gyre," spiraling outward, round and round, until it somehow detaches from the center. It is, we know, the tendency of things spiraling too fast and wide to spin out of control. Yeats wrote this:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Neither Yeats nor his readers had yet heard the worst of their time's passionate intensity, yes, born of World War I, but gaining full voice in the 1930's. The voice itself belonged to Adolph Hitler, but its passionate intensity reverberated in cruel acts of hatred and blood-thirst for glory committed by many whose names are not preserved by infamy. I will this morning make no comparisons to Hitler, for I see no one comparable, but I will remind us all that one man did not inflict such horrors upon the world by himself. He used hard times with their resentments and frustrations to turn people against the most vulnerable among them, the scapegoats for their passions, and we hear voices of such hatred today.

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." I think that image of things spiraling out of control describes quite well the feelings of October 2008. People who thought they were too smart ever to lose are costing young and old their homes and jobs, small businesses the sales they need to meet payroll, and those retired or looking to retire their foundational stability. Chaos spreads fear as it shakes the core of confidence and trust. But let's hear the second poem, much older.

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble,
therefore we will not fear
though the earth should change . . .

The psalmist continues with images of the raging chaos of nature and of war – the earthquakes, volcanos, and tsunamis of both kinds. But out of the turmoil comes renewed trust in the God who loves us, and God’s steadfast, redeeming love is the center that holds, even when things are spinning out of control.

We are told that the great danger right now is not the roller-coaster Dow Jones but something called constriction. As people lose confidence, they tighten their grip on what they have. Shoppers stop spending. Banks balk at lending and so strangle businesses which then lay off employees, as fear keeps tightening its grip.

Our reading from Isaiah comes from a time of constriction. The Jews who returned to their homeland from Babylonian exile found themselves waist-deep in frustration. The rebuilding of Jerusalem began but then stalled out. Harvests disappointed and petty foes interrupted the work. Just when cooperation was needed most, people pulled away from each other, retreating into fearful selfishness, gripping tightly whatever they could grab for themselves. Bitterly, they complain to God about religion’s failure to bring benefit: “Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?”

Speaking for God, the prophet calls upon his people to stop and look at themselves, listen to themselves, and consider their own behavior. “Look,” he says, “you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.” Let me ask you to do something very easy. Tighten your hand as though grasping something you feared might be taken from you . The very feeling of that action of tightening my grip triggers something related to the feeling of clenching my fist, which is a preparation to fight. Fear sets the mood for conflict. Now, open you hand, and feel the change.

The prophet tells his people God wants them to open their hands, stretch their limbs, and widen their concern in a hard time. God takes no pleasure in seeing people humble themselves in the constricted sense of humility – the bowed and scrunched posture of fearful self-concern. No, God wants them to stand up and open their hands to each other: “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke.” Further, “to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin (in their time of need).” *Stop pulling back and pull together.*

The conflict in times of constriction is between fear and faith. We have both, and I do not wish to deny the reality or validity of either. People have reason to be afraid. But which is stronger, which will control our moods and determine our actions, fear or faith?

If we let it take control, fear makes us a danger to ourselves and to others. We cannot help feeling it, but we can decide what to do with it. Faith is not immune to fear but knows where to take its fears and find strength to handle them. The center can hold. We have a choice not to become self-centered and tight-fisted. The Bible's idea of salvation involves release from a cramped space of tight confinement out into an open area where people stretch and move and even dance or play. Out of the darkness and into the sunlight. Out of the dungeon, the trap, the box into which times of constriction squeeze us, and into the field, the green pasture, the open air.

In our online Bible study discussion, one of our participants said this of our present economic distress:

Times such as these can make us grow closer together and more compassionate because we may be forced to look beyond ourselves to others who are struggling so much harder than we are. Times like these can make us creative and thankful for each other and our support networks. If there's no money to go to movies, we can rent videos and make popcorn at home...you bring the popcorn and butter, I'll bring the movies. My point here is that by faith, we will weather this storm and be smarter and hopefully richer (not just in money) for it!

What are the possibilities? Could not, for example, our partnership with Bet-El Hispanic Presbyterian Church bring us together in ways that shared the spiritual and social with food we all brought a little of? We could have loaves-and-fishes times in Bonham Hall, with no one shamed or left out. Sharing beats formal benevolence any day.

Paul tells the Philippians he has learned how to get along on much or little, how to thrive in plenty or lack. If I trust God only when all is going well for me and life seems secure, then do I really trust God at all? Fear generates mistrust, suspicion, and anger; it clenches the fist. Faith generates understanding, compassion, and a generosity with much or little; it opens the hand. Where do we put our trust, in what we have or in the One who loves us and will hold on to us in all circumstances? The center can hold. Amen.