

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Reformation Sunday, October 30, 2011
Lessons: Deuteronomy 24:10-15 and Luke 6:31-38

THE DAILY

One clear but windy day, I was driving alone south on Telegraph Road taking the back way home from the Delaware Memorial Bridge. Above and ahead of me, a large bird was playing on the wind. With admirable skill, it slid down the currents, then swept in curves and glided back across the sky. Another large bird came into view doing the same kind of flying. They were not hunting or doing anything else that appeared productive or purpose-driven. With remarkable grace and the easy skill of accomplished fliers, they were playing, just playing, on the wind. Hawks? Eagles? No, they were vultures – turkey vultures – enjoying what looked to be a grand time at play.

Many animals play. Otters are famous for it, but they are not alone in taking time to frolic. I watched a zoo-kept tiger play with an empty quarter-keg, batting it around until it popped into the air, then fell with a clang scaring the tiger which would run away but then return to repeat the game. I think that tiger was having fun scaring itself, like a child telling ghost stories or taking a Halloween walk through a spook house. I have seen a chipmunk tease a squirrel, playing with the irritability of its larger cousin. Wolverines slide like sledding children down snow banks, then run back to the top to slide again and again.

Animals play. When their young do it, we say they are training for life, developing their hunting skills or quick escapes from predators, but I doubt the animals are working consciously toward such outcomes. From what I have seen, I think they are just playing.

It is imperative that children play because play is a child's business. Our outcome-based society, however, no longer values play. We park our children in front of electronic screens to "keep them amused." Then we try to entice, coerce, or praise them into tedious school work designed to raise their test scores. Even their games and sports are not play but stressful, outcome-based work. We dull their minds with amusements, then push them to develop productivity. When do they learn to think, imagine, dream of possibilities and even fantastic impossibilities instead of just coughing up the right answers on tests?

Human life is not created to be outcome-based. We are not made to be useful. God has made us to be responsive and responsible, but there is a world of difference between being responsible (which requires thought and willingness) and being merely useful (which

means laboring toward the goals of someone else who is in charge). Why are we intent upon training our children to be slaves?

Christian faith has been corrupted by outcome-based thinking. From Moses and the prophets to Jesus himself, God has sought our trust so we can stop trying to outdo each other and learn to share life and hope. Salvation is a matter of living freely and generously, prizing such qualities as kindness, cooperation, faithfulness, and fairness – all of which are despised as weaknesses in our outcome-based drive for wealth and power. Powerful rulers turned Christianity into a clever mechanism for controlling people by threatening them with hellfire while enticing them with someday-bliss in heaven. Do as you're told and you'll get through the pearly gates; rebel or slack off and you'll burn in torment. That's the gospel of Jesus Christ corrupted to make people submissive to those with the power to use them.

God brought the children of Israel out of their slavery into freedom and responsibility as God's beloved people who would show the world how wonderful it was to be loved by God and to trust that love. As foreign workers¹ enslaved by the Egyptians, the Israelites or Hebrews became that society's lowest class of people who were both scorned and feared but also used for hard labor and dirty jobs. Need huge blocks of stone hauled and hoisted for a grand building project? Get the Hebrews to do it. So what if it breaks down their bodies? There are always plenty more of them – too many. They breed like animals. So, make it a policy to kill some of their baby boys to keep their numbers manageable.²

Salvation is healing and release from bondage into freedom for movement and growth; it is the healing of human relationships – love, not usefulness. Sometimes when I hear Christians talking about salvation in outcome-based terms of heaven and hell, I am reminded of the joke about the two men who came unexpectedly upon a grizzly bear that suddenly seemed dangerously interested in them. One man froze, but the other turned to run. The first whispered, “Don't, you can't outrun a bear,” to which the other replied, “I don't have to outrun the bear; I just need to outrun you.”

Salvation is God's good measure of life “pressed down, shaken together, running over” and poured into your lap. It is *daily life*, which is such a wonderful thing that we train ourselves to lose by rushing through it in our endless efforts at self-justification. Am I suggesting we should stop working, laze around, and accomplish nothing? No, of course not. I am saying we need to receive every day from God as the gift of life with the special gifts of love and friendship, of growing minds and wondrous bodies, of family, neighborhood, and community. We need laughter and play so we can work hard again but with keener minds and uplifted spirits. Life is not meant to be drudgery, worry, fear, and resentment. We are not supposed to have to drug ourselves to find rest.

Listen to Jesus' teaching. It's all about the *here and now*. Treat others as you would like them to treat you. Don't use people. Relate to them with respect. They are not human resources but persons, and God loves them, too. That's what we need to know and believe most – that God loves us . . . and them, too. Yes, even our enemies, which does not mean we just roll over and let them trample us. That's not love; that's stupidity. But Jesus sends us, not to defeat and destroy our enemies, but if possible to win them over because, however angry God may be at their cruelty and destructiveness, they too are children of God. And often our personal enemies are just people in some kind of pain we don't understand.

Am I rejecting the hope of heaven? No, I am not, and wherever and however heaven proves to be, I hope to see you there. How many times over the past thirty-nine years and counting have I said in funerals – services of witness to the resurrection – that the so-called little things of daily life are the very substance of life because they are matters of friendship and love? We need to work, strive, and achieve for our own sake and for the good of the human community and especially of its least regarded, but love is the substance of life. We are given strengths and skills so we can work, achieve, and make; but love, not achievement, is the measure of life. *The daily* and not the outcome is what God gives us.

We tend to speak of the daily in our lives as routine and trivial. We make the same mistake in viewing the bigger picture, and so we write history as a succession of wars, as though warfare were the very substance of the human story and times of peace were just interludes when little of greatness happens. Is peace a waste of time? Is daily life really trivial? Is life itself just a prelude to death?

People of Jesus Christ, we need to live and follow his call to let others live. Anyone who imagines I'm calling for laziness has not considered the magnitude and ferocity of the forces that enslave people, use them and toss them aside, and are currently driving our youths and young adults toward despair. We live in a world of such contempt for the majority of earth's people and such cruel indifference to their sufferings that laziness and selfishness are not options for anyone who hears the call of Christ to follow and serve.

Neither do we live only for the moment. Christ gives us hope to live by and share. We are a forward looking people, not because we are goal-driven, but because we have a promise from God the world needs to be ready to receive. That's the real issue of God's kingdom. We cannot earn it, we cannot deserve it, we cannot take it for ourselves – neither with good lives nor with strong faith in Jesus Christ and the Christian message. Faith is not the super good work that gets us into heaven. God does not love us and redeem us because we believe or because we "accept" Jesus. We believe, we trust, we receive salvation because God loves us and redeems us in Christ. That's what we're celebrating on Reformation Sunday: the triumph of God's grace – God's freely given and freely to be shared love.

As I watched the lowly and generally scorned vultures playing with such skill and ease upon the winds, I felt first the shame of my own stress to preach trust and freedom but live daily compulsion and self-judgment. Then, I felt a sort of relief and quiet joy at realizing anew who is the giver of life, hope, freedom, and salvation to be enjoyed and shared in the daily-ness of living – whose world this truly is and who loves us too much to let go, now or ever. Amen.

Notes:

1. The Hebrew word for foreign worker is *ger* (pronounced gair), plural *gerim* (pronounced as gair-EEM). When Moses flees to Midian, marries there, and has a son, he names the child Gershom, “for he said, ‘I have been an alien residing in a foreign land.’” (Exodus 2:22 NRSV) *Gerim* were vulnerable to exploitation because they were outsiders who lacked the support systems and means of recourse available to citizens. For years, there has been debate over any connection between the designation “Hebrews” (as a group of people) and the many references in ancient Near Eastern sources to people known as *Habiru* or *‘Apiru*, which seems to refer to an ethnically mixed class regarded as raiders or outlaws but also used as laborers and mercenaries. Current scholarly opinion seems mostly to reject a direct connection between Hebrews (*‘ibri*) and *‘Apiru*, but the attitude of the Egyptian pharaoh toward the Israelites as expressed in Exodus seems to me strikingly similar to that expressed toward the *‘Apiru* elsewhere. I am not arguing that “Hebrews” and *‘Apiru* can be identified as sometimes formerly suggested, but only that the children of Israel came to be regarded in Egypt in that same fearful but contemptuous way. As John Bright states, “We cannot . . . simply equate Hebrews and *‘Apiru*. *‘Apiru* are found much too far afield to allow such a thing.” (*A History of Israel*, fourth edition, p. 94) Since the word *‘Apiru* appears not to be an ethnic designation but a term for a type or class of people, the attitude and treatment may mean more than any more formal connections among people so regarded and treated. At any rate, it is clear in the Exodus telling of the story that the children of Israel were feared, scorned, and exploited by their Egyptian masters, and that they were at the bottom of Egyptian society as outsiders without honor.
2. See Exodus 1:7-22.