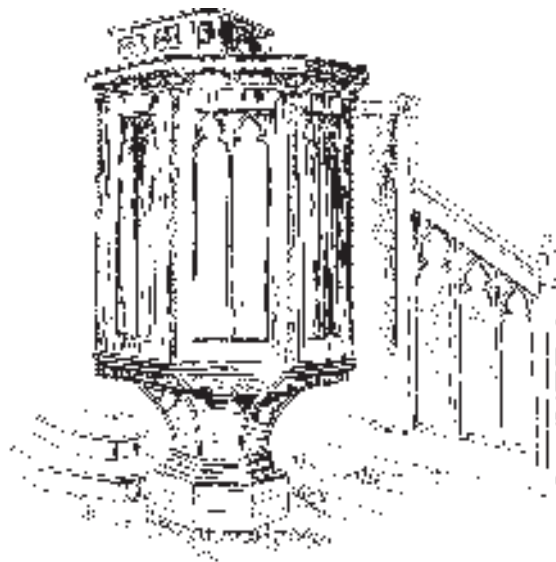


February 22, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

The Art of Balance
by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Luke 10:25-28

I guess I've always been sensitive to balance.

When I was a toddler I had a series of allergies that somehow worked against assimilating my food. I ended up with rickets like a starving child from Biafra. I had a concave chest and I guess it became a point of conversation in the neighborhood gossip circles. Anyway at 92 my Mom is still more than a little bit sensitive when I have the temerity to remind her. The treatment was for me to drink goat's milk instead of cow's milk and to eat a balance diet. Not being enamored of vegetables, the balanced diet was the hard part. When I wasn't able to hand off my vegetables to Punchy, our cocker spaniel, I was likely to see them again for breakfast. Not a way to start your day. Peas be with you. I still find it difficult to balance my diet. Thank God for V-8 juice.

The summer between 5th and 6th grade, our family had an extended vacation at the Jersey shore. We joined a yacht club and my older brother and I were enrolled in the day camp. We took swimming and sailing lessons. Because there weren't many kids my age, I was assigned to a group of older kids to learn how to sail. They put 5 or 6 of us in a Comet sailboat with an instructor and sent us off. Everyone could tell rather quickly that I was fearful the boat would tip over. So...it became kind of a game. Let's see how much Sandy screams when we tip the boat. My brother especially thought this was great fun.

Several years later I became an accomplished sailor and even came close to representing the United States in the '64 Olympics. I had conquered my fear of tipping along the way. If you can swim, it's really no big deal to capsize in a sailboat. I wasn't afraid anymore, but I kept my sensitivity for balancing the boat. That sensitivity led in part to my achievement in the sport. If you balance a small sailboat just right, you don't have to use the rudder as much; there is less drag on the boat; and you go faster. I had a feel for that balance.

Balance has a part to play in almost any sport – gymnastics, archery, shooting, baseball, basketball. You name it. Balance is particularly important in golf. What sets apart the really good golfers from the rest of us who love the game is the ability they have to control their tempo and body and stay in balance throughout the swing.

Balance is important to Jesus, too. In our scripture today he affirms the two greatest commandments: to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind...and to love your neighbor as yourself. Balance is all over those two commandments. How are we to love God? We are to love him with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength and all our mind. Not *just* our mind. It shouldn't be some kind of theological head trip. It is a balance of all four: heart, soul, strength and mind.

And when we love our neighbors, as we love ourselves, that's a balancing act too. How do I love myself? Well, certainly I don't think everything I do is wonderful. I mess up—a lot! It's called "sin." There's not a day that goes by that I don't need to say a prayer of confession by noon. So, loving my neighbor doesn't mean I have to love everything my neighbor does. After all, I don't love everything I do! I need to balance between loving my neighbor and hating the sin my neighbor does. Isn't that what we learned in Sunday School—hate the sin, but not the sinner? It is a matter of balance.

There's even a measure of balance between the two commandments. We aren't supposed to become hermits living off in some wilderness so we think about God all day. I know some Christians throughout history have done just that, but not Jesus. He always came back from the mountain top. He went away to pray, but then came back to live out his faith in the world. We are to love God *and* our neighbor. It is a matter of balance.

One of the main characters in the movie classic *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is Ralph Hopkins (played by Fredric March), president of the United Broadcasting Corporation. Hopkins has been a success by the world's standards. He heads a major corporation. He is wealthy, and he is well-known. He has poured his entire life into his work.

But, all is not well with Ralph Hopkins. Ralph's health is not good. His doctor recommends that he sleep more and work less. In nearly every scene we see Ralph in search of a drink. Though Ralph has been a success at business, his personal life has been a dismal failure. Though the word *divorce* is not used, it's clear Ralph and his wife share no intimacy. In fact, though they are cordial, they live in separate homes.

In a particularly sad, yet moving, scene, Ralph Hopkins reveals his life's "mistake" to one of his employees, Tom Rath (played by Gregory Peck). "You know where I made my mistake?" Ralph asks. "And yet somebody's got to do it. Somebody's got to dedicate himself to it. Big successful businesses just aren't built by men like you: nine-to-five, home and family. You live on 'em, but never build one. Big successful businesses are built by men like me. We give everything we've got to it, lift it up regardless of anybody or anything else. And without men like me, there wouldn't be any big successful

businesses. My mistake was in being one of *those* men.”

Balance. There is a danger of doing too much, as well as of doing too little. Life is not for work, but work for life. When work is carried to the extent of undermining life or unduly absorbing it, work becomes blameworthy, not praiseworthy.

Sandra had an unusual problem, and it would be the ruin of her family. She lived in Cincinnati with her husband, Alexander, and three children ages two, three, and five. When her husband could no longer bear with her problem, he moved out of the home. Two weeks later he called the police to report that his wife was neglecting the children. The police drove to Sandra's apartment and found deplorable conditions. The children's playroom was littered with broken glass and debris, and there were children's handprints in human feces.

Sandra's problem, said her husband, was a compulsion for surfing the Internet. She spent up to 12 hours a day at the computer.

Police Sergeant, Paul Neudigate, said, “She would lock the children in their rooms so as not to be bothered. The place was in complete shambles, but the computer area was clean—completely immaculate.” Police took custody of the children and charged Sandra with three counts of child endangerment. In a world filled with interesting and pleasurable things, balance and self-control are survival skills.

God knows, we are living in an extremely anxious time—two wars and the worst economy since the Great Depression. Unemployment is sky rocketing. More than one person has recalled the words of FDR, “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.” Yet it doesn't seem to help. We are afraid and that seems to be exasperating the problem. At least that's what the pundits are saying.

Our church is going through an anxious time as well. The two are directly related. A national Web cast on Thursday put on by the Alban Institute stated that those churches most affected by the current economic downturn are ones with a high dependency on invested funds and ones with a well-to-do membership. They didn't specifically mention Westminster, but they could have. Like many colleges and other not-for-profits, our investments dropped by a third in 2008. For nine months your church leaders have tried to discern how to balance our budget.

One point of contention continues to be our invested funds. What should we do? Spend some or not? At what rate? The Session's answer, as I wrote to you several days ago, was to seek to balance current needs and future viability of the funds—to look at the intergenerational equity involved—our generation and future generations, too. It is not an easy task or even an easy conversation. We have cut over \$225,000 from our budget. We are taking \$130,000 less from our invested funds than last year.

It is not an easy conversation—certainly no lack of opinions. Some would have us not use any draw on our invested funds. Anyone who has taken Economics 101 knows that would be best for the future. On the other hand, we also know the church is not a bank. Some folks point to “Aunt Tally” (fictitious) who left \$50,000 in 1965 when she died. They say Aunt Tally wouldn't want us to go into the principle, just income and dividends. Others say Aunt Tally gave us the money for a rainy day and what we have here is a tsunami. You can make a case for both points of view. I've heard both points of view from donors and potential donors about their bequests to the church. The ones who really feel strongly about just utilizing the income often give their money that way—with restrictions—which we honor.

So, we've tried to balance our use of the unrestricted invested funds. We've cussed and discussed. We've prayed and asked God for guidance. We've talked to experts. We've voted in secret and publicly. We've talked with the ministers present and with the ministers absent. In the end we decided on a budget which tries to live into a balance. Did we do it right? Were we perfect? I don't know. I think we're in the ballpark, but certainly I'm not sure it is the perfect answer. No one knows what the next 18 months will bring.

One thing I am sure of, dead certain, 100% certain, Aunt Tally didn't give her \$50,000 in 1965 so we could have a church fight over it in 2009. *"Here folks, I'm leaving you \$50,000 when I die. Forty-four years from now I hope you really disagree about how to use this money. Maybe some of you will get energized over this. Instead get energized over Jesus. Wouldn't that be great? Maybe some of you will stop going to church because the Session doesn't meet your definition of running a good business."* I mean, can you imagine that? Whew! I can't.

Back in 1960 C. S. Lewis wrote a book called *The Screwtape Letters*. Lewis imagines the devil, Screwtape, giving advice in letter form to his nephew, Wormwood, on how to get the Christians from following Christ. It's an amusing, yet insightful book—very entertaining. "Get them to dwell on the hypocrites in the church," Screwtape tells Wormwood. "Get them away from scripture. Get them to major in minors." If Screwtape were writing today, I'd bet he'd advise Wormwood to get us to spend an inordinate amount of time on worrying and discussing and obsessing about our invested funds, so we'd forget about loving God and neighbor.

Once upon a time, according to the tales of the Hasidim, Rabbi Israel joined the disciples, pipe in hand. It was a good time to ask a question.

"Tell us, dear rabbi," they said, "how should we serve God?"

The rabbi was surprised at the question but then began at once to tell them this story:

"There were two friends, and both were accused of a crime before the king. Since he loved them, he wanted to show them mercy. He could not acquit them because even the king's word cannot prevail over a law. So he gave this verdict:

"A rope was to be stretched across a deep chasm, and the two accused were to walk it, one after the other. Whosoever reached the other side was to be granted his life.

"It was done as the king ordered, and the first of the friends got across safely.

"The other, still standing in the same spot, cried to him: 'Tell me, my friend, how did you manage to cross this terrible chasm on that thin and swaying rope?'

"The first of the two prisoners called back: 'I don't know anything but this: whenever I felt myself toppling over to one side, I leaned to the other.'"

Rabbi Israel makes two points. First, no one solves the pressures of life simply by standing still. When life is off balance, the only way to stay on our feet is by moving in the other direction. Standing still—going on doing what we've been doing—only intensifies the tilt we're in.

Second, any excess—leaning either entirely to the right or entirely to the left—will only damage us one way or the other in the end. Extremes are not the answer to anything. Stopping everything leaves us without a sense of purpose, the heartbeat of our lives, a reason to get up in the morning. On the other hand, doing more of the same or doing it faster—even in an attempt to end the pressure—only hastens the burnout or the breakdown.

There is a picture hanging crookedly on your living room wall. It bothers you, so you walk to the picture and push up the side that is hanging low. You step back, squint your eyes, and decide now the picture is straight. You leave the room feeling good about getting things to look the way they should.

The next day you walk through the living room and are surprised to see the picture is once again hanging as crookedly as it did yesterday before you straightened it. You conclude you must have failed to get it really level the day before. Again you push up the side hanging low, step back, eyeball the picture, and decide this time you have it right.

The next day to your great frustration you find the picture hanging crookedly again. You are sure you had it right the day before. You push it straight and walk away wondering whether it will be crooked again tomorrow.

The next day it is crooked again. What's going on! Then it dawns on you. Perhaps the wire on the back of the picture is not centered on the wall hook. You take hold of the picture, slide it to the left a fraction of an inch, and then level it.

The next day when you return to the living room, you find your picture hanging straight and true, the way you left it the day before.

A picture will stay balanced only if it is centered on the hook. Without that, any corrections are temporary. In the same way, until we center ourselves in Jesus Christ, no matter how hard we try to straighten out our lives, they will eventually fall out of line.