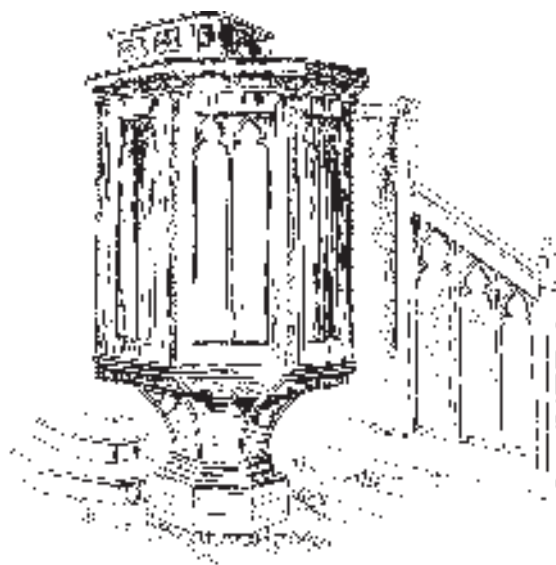


August 23, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Embracing Boundaries

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Genesis 3:1-7

Several years ago when our children were still teenagers, our family had a week's vacation at Myrtle Beach. The first night we arrived the kids coerced us into taking them to the Pavilion—the local amusement park in the center of town.

Now, I'll admit right off I've never been great at amusement parks; but, I kept up with our group surprisingly well in the early going—one ride on the Log Jammer, one ride each on the Enterprise, Tilt-A-Whirl, Bumper Cars, and a ride (whose name I've forgotten) where airplanes fly upside down. Then, a quiet interlude for the Merry-Go-Round. I couldn't believe how well I was doing. But, then came the Corkscrew! I had to put my foot down. Just looking at that roller coaster going upside down was too much. I had turned as green as the polo pony on my shirt. I knew it was time to stop.

Life is limitation.

Charlie, who is 11, brought home all Cs on his report card. Disappointment registered on his parents' faces. Later, they made an appointment with a psychologist to see if the horror of their suspicions could be true. Could it be that they, an urbane, sophisticated, well-educated couple, had created an average child?

The psychologist told them there was nothing wrong with their son. He was, in fact, a pretty well put together person: inquisitive, above average I.Q. He had many friends, and he was happy.

“But why is he making Cs?” asked the parents. “He’s always made at least Bs.”

“For one thing, he has had a big growth spurt this year. For another, he has other interests. He’s learning to play the guitar.” replied the psychologist. “And besides, the school he’s in now is tougher than the one he was in last year.”

The conversation was going rather well until the psychologist added, “Right now, for Charlie, what’s wrong with Cs?” The parents were appalled. They left and found another psychologist.

My friend was 38, happily married, had three beautiful children, a good job as a lawyer, and, on top of everything, he even had a golf handicap of six. But after golf one day, he looked despondent. I asked how things were going and he said, “Not very well. I guess I’m going through mid-life crisis or something. Suddenly I’m realizing that all my lifelong dreams are going unfulfilled. I’m never going to be a Louis Nizer or an F. Lee Bailey in court. In fact, I probably won’t be as good a lawyer as my dad. And you saw the way I played golf today (he shot an 82!). I’m never going to win the club championship playing that way!”

Life is limitation, whether it’s a lab report marked malignant, or a child’s first experience of having to choose just one flavor at an ice cream parlor, or the sudden urgency that time is running out.

A psychologist tells the story of taking his young daughter to a high school basketball game. Shortly after they were seated, popcorn in hand, the daughter was anxious to get up and go exploring. Her dad told her that she could walk up and down the bleachers and go around the gym. Then he pointed to the court. “Do you see the black line around the court?” he asked. “You must not step over the line. If you do, you’ll interfere with the game and you might get bumped by one of the players. Do you understand?”

The young girl said she understood. Then, she got up from her seat, walked down the bleachers and right up to the black line. Looking up to make sure her father was watching, she then put her foot just over the line and smiled.

“And the Lord God commanded: ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.’”

Like a diligent parent, God sets limits for all of us. In the Garden of Eden story, the concrete limits are the trees at the center of the garden. They are provided for Adam and Eve so they will understand that their lives come from God. In the middle of Adam’s world, in which he has been given dominion, stands not Adam himself, but the tree of divine life. Adam’s life comes from the middle, which is not Adam, but God. Alongside the tree of life in the middle of Adam’s world, is the forbidden tree—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Here God confronts Adam and Eve and points out their limit. But Adam and Eve refuse their limit. They choose to live *in* the center and not *from* the center. Our story is an assertion that the recognition and honoring of boundaries leads to well being.

Now, why do I bring all this up? Because I don’t think most of us have *really* accepted the notion that life is limitation. We don’t accept death or the limits of our talents, or the hard choices we have to make. We may accept it here, intellectually, but it’s a long trip from the head to the heart. We may assent with our minds that life is limitation, but we live wanting it all.

Here's how a modern writer, Sam Keen put the matter:

"There are so many lives I want to live. So many styles I would like to inhabit. In me sleeps Zorba's concern to allow no lonely woman to remain comfortless, Camus' passion to lessen the suffering of the innocent, Hemingway's drive to live and write with lucidity, and the unheroic desire to see each day end with tranquility and a shared cup of tea.

"I am so many, yet I may be only one. I mourn for all the selves I kill when I decide to be a single person. Decision is a cutting off. I travel one path only by neglecting many. Actual existence is tragic, but fantastic existence (which evades limits and boundaries) is pathetic. The human choice may be between tragedy and pathos, Oedipus and Willy Loman. So I turn my back on small villages I will never see, strange flesh I will never touch, ills I will never cure, and I choose to be in the world as a husband and a father, an explorer of new ideas and styles of life. Yet perhaps Zorba will not leave me altogether. I would not like to live without dancing, without unknown roads to explore, without the confidence that my actions were helpful to some."

I like that passage, and I agree with Keen that life in that sense is either tragic or pathetic. But, how could it be otherwise? Choice and limit is the core of life. Without limit, without the hard choices that Adam and Eve refused to make, life wouldn't be human at all.

Christian faith begins with a sense of reverence, the recognition of God's greatness and our limitations. That is why there are no atheists in foxholes and few atheists in hospitals. It is not just because people are hypocrites, ignoring God when things are going smoothly and suddenly discovering God and pleading piety when they are in trouble. And it is not just a matter of turning to God out of fear. There are no atheists in foxholes because times like those bring us face-to-face with our limitations. We who are usually so self-confident, so self-reliant, so secure in our ability to control things, suddenly learn that the things that matter most in our lives are beyond our control. At the limits of our own power, we turn to a power greater than ourselves.

People have always found God at the limits of their own strength. Farmers pray for rain; soldiers pray for victory and students pray that they will ace the test, because they understand that no matter how well they do their job, they will need the favor of heaven for things to go well for them. But, most of us today can barely see the limits of our own power and that leaves little room for God, and leaves us with the unwelcome sense of being in ultimate charge of this unmanageable mess we call the world.

"Actual existence is tragic, but fantastic existence (which evades limits and boundaries) is pathetic." I said I like that, and so I do, even though it sounds a little too pessimistic.

It's a good thing that life is limitation. Without discovering the limits of our talents, we'd never discover *who* we are. But more important, without limits we would never discover *whose* we are. We would never discover that the way, the truth, and the life are found in Jesus Christ. We would never discover our source.

So, we need not grieve the distant villages we'll never see. We need not grieve the strange flesh we'll never touch, the wrongs we'll never right, the Masters Golf Tournaments we'll never win, the promotion we'll not receive.

Contentment lies in discerning the things that we have and being grateful for them. I think I've lived just long enough to discern what Paul meant when he wrote this ironic line: "For all things are yours, whether Paul, or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, for you are of Christ, and Christ is of God."

Let us pray:

Great God, teach us what it means to live a life within limits with you as our source. Amen.