

## **THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT**

### **Partners in Courage**

**A sermon preached October 5, 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill**

**Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20** Then God spoke all these words: <sup>2</sup> I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; <sup>3</sup> you shall have no other gods before me. <sup>4</sup> You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.... <sup>7</sup> You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. <sup>8</sup> Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup> Six days you shall labor and do all your work.... <sup>12</sup> Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. <sup>13</sup> You shall not murder. <sup>14</sup> You shall not commit adultery. <sup>15</sup> You shall not steal. <sup>16</sup> You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. <sup>17</sup> You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. <sup>18</sup> When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, <sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die." <sup>20</sup> Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."

**Philippians 2:1-13** If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, <sup>2</sup> make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, <sup>8</sup> he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup> Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. <sup>12</sup> Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; <sup>13</sup> for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

The late Russell Baker was a Pulitzer Prize winning columnist for the New York

Times. Many will remember him as host of PBS' *Masterpiece Theater*. In contrast to his wry and witty commentary in the newspaper and his warm persona on camera, his autobiography, *Growing Up*, reveals a passionless voice. Baker describes painful times without emotion and happy times without joy.

This absence of affect seems to have emerged when he was but five years old at the time his father died. "After that," he writes, "I never cried again with any real conviction, nor expected much of anyone's God except indifference, nor loved deeply without fear that it would cost me dearly in pain."

Those words ache with a loss even greater than that of a father. It is the anguish over the loss of faith. He had absorbed a bitter blow at a tender age and the hairline crack on the surface of his life obscured the red, raw damage deep inside. We all suffer life's abuse. Will we know faith and hope and community while wounds heal, brokenness knits together again, and life's vitality flows once more?

Recently, writer and Episcopal priest Tom Erich surveyed 5,000 of his readers and asked them what questions they would ask of God. The results, he reports, included not a single question about church doctrine or about any of the "hot-button" issues of the day, such as abortion or the definition of marriage. Instead, questions like these were asked: "Who are you, God?" "Where do you live?" "Will I ever get married?" "Why did my wife die so young?" "Will we ever have peace in this world?" "Where is heaven?" "Why do children suffer?" "Will I ever find someone to love me?" It made Erich realize that he had been preaching answers to questions people weren't asking, and it should remind us that the practice of faith has to do with listening to one another, encouraging one another, and seeking God's love in the sharing.

In recent years professional atheists Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris have made a splash raising age-old questions about the reality of God. Popular on talk show and public speaker circuits and writing best-selling books, I think their attacks on conventional religious belief rarely rise above the quality of late night dormitory discussions. They are focused on deriding a God most of us don't believe in anyway, so they fail to grapple with the kind of questions all of us wrestle with – profoundly human questions of meaning and purpose and coherence and the highs and lows of spirit and emotion. Baker, Hitchens, Harris, all 5,000 of Erich's respondents, and each of us face the concerns and joys of common life which prompt profound questions, many of them deeply troubling. We all float in the same boat, because most of our questions can at best achieve only tentative answers. This is true whether you are a fundamentalist Christian, a fundamentalist atheist, or in the vast in-between where the rest of us live.

Whether atheist or theist, we need to be careful that what we don't or do believe in is not some caricature of God. For the church the God we seek and serve is the One seen in the faith of Jesus and is the One whom John said is love, spirit, and truth. The God we worship is not the God who drives men mad with violence, nor the God who performs magic tricks for our amazement, but the God who calls us into community with one another whose center is the goodness of Christ and where we learn self-giving instead of selfishness, hopefulness instead of despair, and courage instead of cynicism.

It is in this Christ community we remember that we are brothers and sisters of

Him and “members of his body,” and that in Him we are called to become partners in courage, for without each other and without courage we are faithless and lost.

The words of Paul to the Philippians are among the most humane in the Bible: “*If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy....*” Paul writes this from prison; he knows something about risk, danger, and despair, yet focuses on the blessings that Christ’s sisters and brothers can enjoy through faith. He did not say that God was about to swoop in and make a dramatic rescue from life’s perils and problems. He spoke instead of *encouragement, compassion, and sympathy...fundamental human experiences found in community.* “*Let each of you,*” he says, “*look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*”

The faith we experience through God-in-Christ is not an ethereal, other-worldly, magical faith. It is an earthy, grounded, humane faith which trusts that life has purpose, our destiny is hope, and our task is to love one another unconditionally and without fear. The object of religion is to discover what is profoundly true, and we enter into partnerships of encouragement by sharing faith and by acting upon what we have come to learn and trust about what is good.

Elyn Saks is the author of *The Center Cannot Hold: My Journey through Madness*. Diagnosed with “chronic paranoid schizophrenia with acute exacerbation,” Saks tells her unique story of suffering and healing with extraordinary power. Though navigating a far more extreme emotional and spiritual landscape than most of us could imagine, she makes observations about wholeness and humaneness and community that are profound. She writes, “There may be a substitute for the human connection – for two people sitting together in a room, one of them with the freedom to speak her mind, knowing the other is paying careful and thoughtful attention – but I don’t know what that substitute might be. It is, at the heart of things, a *relationship*, and for me it has been the key to every other relationship I hold precious. Often, I’m navigating my life through uncertain, even threatening, waters – I need the people in my life to tell me what’s safe, what’s real, and what’s worthy holding on to.”

We are human beings, keeping faith with what life is fundamentally about and how we should go about in it. And, as we go about in it, there could be no better purpose than to be for one another the people who tell one another “what’s safe, what’s real, and what’s worthy holding on to” when life’s perils and perplexities, its gains and losses threaten to unnerve us.

We all ask the same kind of questions. The answer make all the difference in the ways we choose to live. Who cares what happens to me? Who cares what I do? What difference does my life make? The answer is that Christ’s community cares; it is the active witness to the caring of God. Theologian William Muehl tells the story of a child rushing out of his kindergarten room at the end of the day carrying a hand-made “surprise” each student had been working on as Christmas presents for their parents. He was trying to carry the present, put on his coat, and wave all at the same time, when the gaily-wrapped box slipped from his busy hands and destroyed itself on the hard floor in a painful ceramic crash.

Heart-broken, the boy began to wail. The father, seeking to console him, patted

him on the head and said, "Now, now... that's all right. It doesn't matter, son. It really doesn't matter." But the child's mother dropped to her knees on the floor, swept the boy into her arms and said, "Oh, but it does matter. It matters to me." And she wept with her son.

Muehl concludes: "The redeeming God in whom we hope is not the parent who dismisses our lives with a pat on the head and murmured assurances that they do not really matter in cosmic terms. It is, rather, the one who falls to the earth beside us, picks up our torn and bleeding spirits, and says, 'Oh, but it does matter. It matters eternally.'"

That is, it is the community of Christ which falls to its knees beside the wounded and shows them the love and sympathy and encouragement of God telling them "what's safe, what's real, and what's worthy holding on to" at all times.