

November 8, 2015

Christian Experience: “The Presence of God”

Exodus 13:18-21, 19:17-21; Matthew 25:31-46

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Today at National is what we call Commitment Sunday, Stewardship Commitment Sunday. This is a day in which we ask the congregation to make specific commitments to support the ministry of our church over the coming year. As with every other organization which you support, whether it's your college or whether it's a nonprofit of one kind or another, you've every right to ask of your church “*What happens when I give what difference I make? Why is my giving my gift that important?*” And to that question there are different ways of providing an answer.

One way to answer that question is to speak about the difference our gift and our giving actually makes *to you or me – to us!*

- When we think about giving we have to, as Christians, immediately go to the life of our Lord Jesus Christ whom we are reminded of in Scripture again and again as one *who gave himself for us* (e.g., Galatians 1:4, Ephesians 5:25, Titus 1:14). He gives his life away to you and me and calls us to follow in his footsteps, to become “givers” like him. We say we want to be his followers, we want to be like him, and at the heart of the matter, he’s a giver, so he calls us to be deliberate and generous and prayerful and systematic in our way of life, living life as givers.
- He also says to us that it is to our benefit when we give: “it is more blessed” says Jesus, “to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). And “blessed” is just a religious word to express our joy or happiness, our sense of meaning and fulfillment. In other words, Jesus is saying that we will find more meaning and purpose, a greater sense of satisfaction, not by getting, not by receiving, but by giving.

So that’s one way of answering this question about “the difference giving makes”: by saying that it has to do with us, it has to do with you and me: when we give we are walking on the path that Jesus sets before us, we are following the road of discipleship, and on this path we will find the satisfaction, the “filling of the gap within our lives,” for which we were created. That’s one way of answering the question.

Of course there is another way of answering the question that has to do with “what happens to the gifts that we give once they leave our possession and are handed over to the church.” The answer here has to do more with bricks and mortar and programs and events.

Worship: So that here at National when you through your generosity share what you have, we as a congregation, for example, are enabled to worship in a glorious space like this. It’s your

gifts, your generosity that enable this to happen Sunday by Sunday, whether it's really hot outside or really cold outside, whether it's rainy or whether it's dry, we are able to come into this glorious space and lift up our hearts and voices and worship God. In this place we not only hear glorious music but we can sing together – in a world, a society in which there is far less communal singing than there used to be. Here is a place when we can open ourselves up with others and let it go (well, as much as we Presbyterians can ever do that! Decently and in order!) to show that our hearts, not only our minds, but our hearts have been moved by the message of Christ. Sunday by Sunday because of your generosity, over 800 people worship in person or online.

Pastoral Care and Pastoral Presence: So our gifts support our worship and they also support pastoral care. Sometimes we tend to think of pastoral care as directed only to those who are in need. Sometimes this is truly the case – the need is in a time of real crisis, sometimes the need is less critical but no less important. It may come in time of loss or grief or hospitalization – something is wrong in our lives and we need somebody to be there with us to walk alongside us in some way. But sometimes pastoral care is not just about our ‘neediness’ but more generally about pastoral presence at times of transition in our lives. Often these are not times of sadness or difficulty, but times of rejoicing: so a baby is born and we rejoice in that together, and give thanks to God! Or there is a wedding: the celebration before God of a new love and a new family. So there are times for pastoral care when we are celebrating.

Perhaps at the moment, your need for pastoral care – whether to address difficulty or rejoicing – is not apparent – maybe we think we really don't need such care or presence. No doubt, for some of us this is true. But the question that the church must address has to do with the need for the constant availability of care at the moment when in fact we do need it (or when anybody needs it): a moment that often comes suddenly and unexpectedly. The question is “Will it be there then?” What I can tell you is that day by day, week by week within a congregation our size, there is always a need for pastoral care and presence given in one way shape or form to someone in the name of Jesus Christ. And the church is there.

Mission: And then there's our mission in the world and in the community, in the city in which we live: ministries of evangelism and compassion, supporting the translation of the Bible around the world, supporting pastors serving congregations sometimes much larger than ours who have no training and need it desperately. This work is accomplished through our common giving together. Within our own city, there is a need to feed the hungry and care for the homeless.

Christian Education: And then in addition to our mission, there's the educational ministry of the church – the nurture of hundreds of children and of adults in Sunday school classes and in small groups not only on Sundays but throughout the week as well. In past decades when it came to the Christian education of our children we could count on the society around us bolstering the faith that they learned in the church and home. But in these days in which we live, where all the underpinnings of Christian faith are seemingly being removed from society as a whole, the

church becomes absolutely central as a place to strengthen the life of the family and the nurturing of our children, so that they in due season will become followers of Jesus Christ.

And this need is not only there for children but for adults too. It is more critical than it has ever been, in this changing environment, for adults to get together with other adults who share both faith and questions in order to talk about faith together – so the church plans and nurtures small groups which gather at multiple locations throughout the metropolitan area. (Check out the www.nationalpres.org for details). One of our small group facilitators, Dick Pera, reflected on his experience of being a facilitator like this:

I was asked to lead a small group this spring, and I said ‘yes’, not out of the feeling of needing or wanting a small group, but because our church asked and I wanted to help. Our group consisted of 12 very busy people. We talked about sermon topics, we prayed, we laughed, we learned together. In volunteering for my church something happened. God intervened and things turned upside down for me. I thought I was helping others but it turns out that others were helping me quench a thirst I didn't even know I had.

Now in this brief statement, Dick says a lot of important things about volunteering when you're not quite sure that that's what you need or want to do. He mentions discussing our faith together, praying together, laughing together, learning together – all of which are important. But the phrase that I want us to pick up on and think about in the next few minutes is the phrase that mentions that in the midst of everything else God intervened: “*In volunteering for my church something happened, God intervened.*” God showed up! There was some kind of a divine interaction, the sense of God's presence and God's power that was really, really important.

And for me, at least, this is the bottom line when it comes to “the difference our giving makes”: that through all the many different things that we are enabled to do (through our worship in this spectacular place, through glorious music, through pastoral care and mission, and discussions of one topic after another, through all of these) *that they become channels of the presence of the living God in our lives*, so that through our gifts we not only support the church as a great religious institution, but we create the structures and the programs and the processes through which we can actually meet God; finding ourselves in the presence of God, finding God intervening in our lives, transforming our lives regularly, bit by bit, not as one who is ‘vaguely out there somewhere,’ but as one who is right here, constantly touching our lives for good, for blessedness, for Christ, in one way shape or form.

Ultimately this is what Jesus wants for us: not only to become givers (like him as a giver) but that the church we give to becomes the vehicle – a source of blessing and blessedness – through which we and many come to meet God, know God, experience God, and fall in love with God – and to be changed by that experience.

When Jesus defines eternal life in the 17th chapter of John's Gospel (John 17:3) he defines it in these words: “*This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*” To Jesus, then, eternal life is not just about going to heaven when we die: though he certainly believed this (check out Luke 23:43); and not just that when we do die and go to

heaven we come to know God intimately (and God knows us!), though this, too, is true. But that right here and now eternal life begins – the life which has the quality of heaven and eternity about it, the life in which you and I, small as we may be, have been given the privilege of knowing God (and of God knowing us)!

This is what Jesus wants; this is what he gives as a gift of grace: this relationship with God which is *more than knowledge about* God. We can *know about* figures who lived in the past: we can *know about* Abraham Lincoln, we can *know about* George Washington, and many others, but still not know them. Knowing about someone, and about God, is certainly good: we should certainly know as much about God as we can! But eternal life is *not just knowing about* God; rather, says Jesus, it's actually *knowing God, directly*. Not as if God were an historical figure, but as if God were family, as if God were friend or neighbor, someone with whose life we actually interact – like the people who live in our house, who work in our office, who are here today. And while along the way we may come to know interesting things about these people second hand, it is only when our lives interact with them first hand, when they are really here with us, when our lives are spatially and temporally close to theirs, that we can actually come to know them. And Jesus says that this is how it needs to be and can be with us and God.

Of course for us to know God like this, to meet God, to experience God like this, we have to know where God is – we have to know where God can be found, and we have to bring our lives to those places and situations where God can be found.

For some people this may seem to be a rather strange thing to say, because we all know the answer to the question “Where is God?” We can all get an “A+” by answering “God is everywhere.” We know that God is absolutely everywhere –and this is a true answer. But when it comes to asking the question in the context of scripture this true answer is only part of the truth, not the whole truth. That is, when we read in the Bible about the presence of God, and ask “Where is God?”, what we discover is that the God who is everywhere actually longs to be in some places in particular more than in others, and in these places he is present in ways in which ordinary people like you and me can actually meet God, ways in which our lives can intersect with God, ways in which God comes to know us and we come to know God. And this intersection, this intervention and knowing is shown to be profound.

So think for a moment about that reading we heard in Exodus where the children of Israel are escaping from slavery in Egypt and they're heading across the Red Sea and on their way to the Promised Land. And God says to the people “I'm going to be with you.” And the people don't respond by saying “We know that you're everywhere, so why are you telling us you are ‘going to be with us’?” No, they understand that this promised presence is about a special presence: when God says “I'm going to be with you, and I'm going to give you a tangible sign of that; there's going to be this fire by night and this cloud by day, and the cloud and the fire will never leave you but will guide you along the way” he's saying “I'm here with you especially, to guide and direct, to be found and known!” So God leads and guides until they come to Mount Sinai. Sinai is called the “Mountain of God” because God is present there in this special way. To be sure,

God is everywhere – of course! But at this place, Sinai, God meets people – actually confronts people; the power of God, the awesome power and majesty of God are particularly experienced there. In fact, in the quest for intimacy with God, the experience of God’s presence at Sinai is a reminder that the one who wants to be intimate with us is still the amazing God who made the universe! There is this balance in the story, between the awesome (dangerous and holy) power of God which cannot stand sin for a moment, and the offering of intimacy with Moses (on this occasion, note that the intimacy is not for everyone!): so that at Mount Sinai Moses meets God face-to-face, and, despite his sin, God speaks to him and transforms him. God was there: everywhere, to be sure, but especially there.

And such stories as these are told throughout the pages of the Old Testament. One other, for example, is in Genesis 28. It’s the story of the grandson of Abraham, Jacob, fleeing from his family when he has betrayed his brother and his father. At night he comes to this place which he names “Bethel,” which means ‘house of God’. At Bethel, Jacob has a dream of a ladder going up and down to heaven, and angels climbing up and down on it. And when he wakes up from this dream, he says “Surely God was in this place and I did not know it.” Well God is everywhere, right? But God was there in particular: and Jacob came to know God in a special way in that place, in that moment, through that experience.

This way of thinking about God – that God is everywhere but yet in some places in particular – is portrayed not only in the Old Testament but on the New Testament, the time of Jesus, as well.

In fact I firmly believe that Jesus is, in part, answering this question (as to where we find God, where you and I can find our lives connected with God) when he tells the story that I read from Matthew 25 a few moments ago. It’s a story of a King who meets two groups of people. Some have done well; some have done not so well. And the king who represents God and represents Jesus says this:

“I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you gave me clothing; I was sick and you took care of me; I was in prison and you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer the king, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food or thirsty and gave you something to drink and when was it we saw you a stranger and welcomed you were naked and gave you clothing and when was it we saw you?’ [DR: as if to say, ‘I mean, where were you? Were you there? We didn't remember that you were there at all. When did we come in contact with you? We don't remember that!’]

To which the King replies (Jesus replies, God replies): ‘truly I tell you, as you did it to one of the least of these members of my family you did it to me.’”

In other words, if we were to ask the question about where God was, Jesus would be replying by saying

“Well you’re going to find God in those people who are in desperate need, and especially at the moment when you go to be with them in their need.

You’re going to find God in those places of pastoral care.

You’re going to find God in those places of mission and service in a world in which there is all kinds of need. God is there. God beats us to those situations, and says ‘Come and join me. That’s where you’ll meet me, and in so doing, your faith and your life will be touched and transformed by my special presence.’”

Where is God? Well, God is there in those moments of mission, service, care and desperate need, in our world. But not just there. Jesus is answering the same question when he speaks to his first followers about sharing his message with the world, when he speaks about evangelism and about the building up of the church with his teaching.

Or, we move on to the last chapter and verses of Matthew's Gospel (28:19-20), and Jesus, after the resurrection says to his followers, “Go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe all that I command you.”

“Go! Baptize!” That is, “Bring others into my flock, that is, baptize them. Create the church, be instruments through which the church is built.”

“Teach!” That is, create a ministry of teaching through which others come to know who I am and what I said and say.

And then, when you do this, the promise comes “Remember (Lo!) I will be with you to the end of the age.”

So the disciples don't go, “Well we know that you are everywhere, so what’s the big deal here?” rather they know that Jesus makes this promise because he wants them to know that when they serve him, when they proclaim his message, when they form his community, when they teach his word, he will be found. Their lives can intersect with him; this will not just be a ministry of knowledge about God (though that is involved) but a time of intimate connection with God: *“I’ll be there for you to find me; I will be there to comfort and support you. But what I want especially is for you to find me, so that even in the act of serving me you can find and experience eternal life.”* So the question is being asked there, as to where is God.

And obviously Jesus is answering the question as well when he turns to his disciples and says (in Matthew 18) explicitly: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in your midst.” Of course God is everywhere but if you want to know where God loves to be, and where God loves to be found, and where your life can connect with God in such a way that the connection is transformative, then, says Jesus explicitly, you've got to come together: two or three at least!

People speak about the importance of spirituality these days – a spirituality that we can have by ourselves. And we can: the God revealed in Scripture certainly does meet people individually, one on one. But God loves to be found and experienced and known *especially when we come together*, when we create spaces and places in which we come together;

whether we come together for worship or Sunday school classes or small groups; or come together to serve or pray. When we come together, says Jesus, just two or three, it doesn't take many, "I'll be there!" I promise that you can know me and meet me in a transformative way. You have every right to expect this, says Jesus. This is my promise, this is what I hope for and what I expect from any church of which I am a part and any church which I myself support and ask others to support as well.

The structure of the church may or may not add up to anything much, though, to be frank, we need them!

- glorious building? that's wonderful
- great programs? that's marvelous
- fantastic music that inspires us

But, for God, these are not ends in themselves, but channels through which God wants to work and move through which God can touch our lives.

And I believe that we've been called, you and I have been called, to support and sustain those structures so this can happen in your life and in my life, and in the lives of many others, not only in this time in which we live but in the days and months and years that lie ahead of us, establishing a place, a community, programs, gatherings in which we meet God.

I hope you can say that in the life of this church, maybe going way back, or maybe right here and now, or somewhere in between, God has met you here, and you have met God, in all kinds of different ways; and that this will be true in the days ahead for you and others, because of the support, including financial support, that you and I have been called to give.

Remember Dick Pera's words?

"I was asked to lead a small group this spring, and I said 'yes,' not out of a feeling of need or wanting a small group, but because our church asked and I wanted to help. Our group consisted of 12 very busy people. We talked about sermon topics, we prayed, we laughed, we learned together, and in volunteering for my church something happened" [That's the issue]: "God intervened! [That's the issue] And things turned upside down for me. I thought I was helping others but it turns out that others were helping me quench a thirst I didn't even know I had.

May God do this for you for me for us and for many others through our support, the gifts that God has entrusted to us and that we share, as we seek to become more and more like the Savior who gave and gives himself to us and for us.

Let us bow before God in prayer, let us pray. Holy God, creator of the universe who is everywhere the most amazing way and yet who longs to dwell in the hearts and the lives and in the communities that center on Jesus Christ, be with us we pray. Grant us energy, strength by the power of your Holy Spirit, to be followers of Christ, to be givers in all kinds of ways in our lives; and find that in giving we receive far more than we ever give. Amen.

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