

First Christian Church
"Our First Refuge"
Psalm 131

In the "Responsive Call To Worship" this morning your first response included, "God is our rock of refuge..." and the title of my sermon is, "Our First Refuge." And by refuge I mean the place we go to seek shelter or protection when we feel threatened or come upon difficult circumstances. You affirmed this morning that God not only is our refuge, but also our rock. Meaning God is refuge we can count on. A stable, immovable place of shelter and protection in times of danger and difficulty. But God was not our first refuge. There was one before that, someone who we came to rely on, though we had no idea what was happening. Our first refuge was our mother, and how that relationship developed later had much to do with how we came to feel about the the "rock of refuge" we affirmed this morning.

It is Mother's Day today, which always comes on a Sunday, like Father's Day and National Grandparents Day. There are three parental Sunday holiday's during the year, and there are three religious Sunday holiday's. Those are Palm Sunday, Easter and Pentecost. Mother's Day is not a religious holiday, and yet with little effort it can be seen as having religious and spiritual implications. Because the whole idea of refuge is crucially important to us, in a world filled with contention and strife. There has to be a place we find shelter from the storms of life, and I expect everyone in this room today has such a place or places.

Its difficult to get through this life without refuges, and though mom was the first one, by the time we reach old age we may have developed many. I'm 64 years old and my refuges include quiet, centering prayer which is another way of saying God, Karen, my journal, this congregation and the wider Church with a capital C, intercessory prayer, music, nature video's on You Tube, the movies, friends and friends on Facebook, and my own mother who I keep in contact with through the modern day miracle of email. These all serve as refuges for me, people and places I turn to when I feel threatened or am burdened by worries or fear. You probably have your own. Just take a moment to think about them. (pause) How many did you come up with?

Since it is Mother's Day I want to talk about motherhood, but the problem is I don't know what parenthood is. I can't even talk about fatherhood from experience, let alone motherhood. About the closest I can come to is taking care of dogs. Right now Karen is with her daughter and granddaughter in the Bahama's and I'm left to care for the dogs. Every morning its different. The morning I wrote this sermon I made my tea, and though Oreo was already up and ready to go outside, I had to be more persuasive with Skylar, our older dog of 14 years. They need to go outside and do there business before I leave for work. So this morning I took my tea and stood in the backyard encouraging both of them to go out and explore.

Skylar needs the most encouragement, because between wondering where Karen is, and shaking off the sleepiness, he didn't want to move much. Oreo was more active, but she wants to stay close to me; she is far more relational than Skylar. I appear to be an adequate substitute for my wife as far as she is concerned, where Skylar wants his mom. That is just a matter of personality differences in dogs. The saddest part of Karen being gone is Skylar laying in the hallway watching the garage door waiting for his mom to come home.

I also was given the opportunity of letting Oreo in the house while Skylar finally did go off by himself somewhere in the backyard. He cannot hear well anymore, so I opened the door and let Oreo in. In this way she could eat her breakfast before Skylar got to it. When I leave I have to put her food on the kitchen table, because Skylar will eat her food as well as his. Oreo ate about half of her breakfast while Skylar was still outside. These are just dogs. How much more difficult must it be to care for little human beings, who are far more complex, clever and complicated? One thing becomes apparent to me out of all this, and that is the fact that motherhood must require an immense amount of patience. Because all of this I've described so far takes patience and encouragement, and that all too scarce of a commodity...time.

So today we take our hats off to our mother's who have served as our first refuge, and to some extent, varying from person to person, remain our refuge for the rest of our lives. And as I mentioned before, the way this important relationship develops, especially in those early years; has a great deal to do with how we feel and come to understand our "rock of refuge" we call God. Without the patience and encouragement of our mother's love it would be extremely difficult to be receptive to God's love; or to even be able to grasp the kind of love the scriptures describe to us. Just a few examples of these scriptures include Jesus pleading with Jerusalem:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings... (Matthew 23:37a)

Or the love of God proclaimed by the prophet Hosea: *I will heal their faithlessness; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be as the dew to Israel, they shall blossom as the lily, they will strike root as the poplar; their beauty shall spread out; their beauty shall be like the olive, and their fragrance like Lebanon. (Hosea 14:4-7)*

And if "The Love Chapter" in first Corinthians was the only thing Paul ever wrote, it still would be a tremendous contribution to the human race: *If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind... (1 Corinthians 13:1-4a)*

My contention is that Jesus, Hosea and Paul all first experienced this type of love they are describing from their mother's. It was only later on in life that the love of God blossomed and grew into what they are describing in the scriptures. Our first refuge is mom. After mom we find and develop other refuges, others places and people to seek shelter from the storm. But if there is any depth to our lives, and if life leads into sensitivity and concern for others, then we never forget mom. In this respect Mother's Day is one of the most important holiday's of the year.

Our text for today progresses from humility to a mother's arms and the contentment of a child, and ends with hope:

God, I'm not trying to rule the roost, I don't want to be king of the mountain. I haven't meddled where I have no business or fantasized grandiose plans. I've kept my feet on the ground, I've cultivated a quiet heart. Like a baby content in my mother's arms, my soul is a baby content. Wait Israel, for God. Wait with hope. Hope now; hope always! (Psalm 131; The Message)

The Interpreters Bible and at least one other commentary on this text did not define the opening lines to this text as describing humility. Actually, it was just the opposite as they interpreted, “O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me...” as the psalmist personal struggle with arrogance. But I understand the psalmist to be making choices about what he's paying attention too, and thinking about. Whereas they seem to see him as subject to human pride and therefore disinterested in God.

Whereas Peterson's interpretation says the psalmist has kept his feet on the ground, and has, “cultivated a quiet heart.” Then the comparison is made to a baby being content in its mother's arms, and ending with, “my soul is a baby content.” Another way of putting that would be to say I've stayed centered in the holy and my soul is content as a baby in its mothers arms. By using the word “centered” suggests the use of meditation, though there are other ways to stay centered in the holy. Such as diligent study of the Bible and ceaseless acts of compassion. But my bias, as most of you well know by now, is meditation and a quiet centering in God.

I'd go a step further to say that study and compassion can lead to soul contentment, but there really needs to be an intentional inward time of contemplation on the holy. One has to be with God inwardly for extended periods of time to ever even hope to come close to what The Apostle describes as, “the peace that passes all understanding.” Study and compassion can open the gate, but quiet prayer takes you through it. Richard Rohr expounds on this:

The fruits of Centering Prayer are found in daily life. Do not look for signs that this prayer is working for you in your subjective experiences during the prayer period. The place to look for results is what happens after you get up from your meditation cushion.

Perhaps the subtlest fruit of the practice of Centering Prayer (and the most delicious!) is a gradually deepening capacity to abide in the state of “attention to the heart,” as it's known in the Christianity of the East. You might describe this as a stable state of mindfulness or “witnessing presence,” but emanating from the heart, not the head, and thus free of intrusion from that heavy-handed mental “inner observer” who seems to separate us from the immediacy of our lives. Once you get the hang of it, attention of the heart allows you to be fully present to God, and at the same time fully present to the situation at hand, giving and taking from the spontaneity of your own authentic, surrendered presence.

As this capacity grows in you, it gradually takes shape as a felt center of gravity within you, the place where the pendulum of your being naturally comes to rest. It's not so much a place you pay attention “to” as a place you pay attention “from.”

As I see it, the purpose of Centering Prayer is to deepen your relationship with God (and at the same time your own deepest self) in that bandwidth of formless, objectless awareness that is the foundation of non-dual consciousness. There you discover that you, God, and the world “out there” are not separate entities, but flow together seamlessly in an unbreakable dynamism of self-giving love, which is the true nature of reality and the ground of everything. In that space you discover the meaning of Thomas Keating's famous statement: “The notion that God is absent is the fundamental illusion of the human condition.”

Contemplative prayer is no longer a luxury; it is an absolute necessity. Up to now, many have thought of contemplation as a devotional, wellness, or personal transformation practice. We're not just doing our meditation to chill out and get right with the world. We are trying to bring to bear a structure of perception, a system of consciousness, that allows us to emphasize and relate to each other without fear, judgment, demonization, or division.

Fear, judgment, demonization and division are running rampant in our society. It's like somebody uncorked the Genie's bottle, and there's no way to easily get the cork back in. We in the church have our work cut out for us. Without contemplation its very difficult to get this work done, because so much time must be spent upon keeping our own lives and relationships in order. One can end up doing the mission of the church in your spare time, rather than being a full-time Christian. Which is what needs to happen if there is any hope in moving the pendulum of society back to the center.

It is upon patience and hope which our text today ends. This is the endpoint of the contentment we can find through "cultivating a quiet heart." The problem is we get caught up with our own lives, and convinced that we can work ourselves out of the messes we create. What usually happens is the more we try to do it on our own, the deeper we become mired in our own problems. We often become our own worst enemy. Sometimes we reach the end of our ropes, which can be the beginning of hope and resurrection, but not always. What we have to learn is to wait on God as the text suggests. Its this type of patience that real hope emerges from. I'll let this Secret Place devotion spell it out for us:

Every day, my cat would sit perched in the window of my bedroom and cry for me to let her inside. There was a door right below the windows, so I would open the door and call to her, telling her there was an easier way to get into the house located right beneath her. She then stopped her meowing for a minute or two to consider what I was saying. But then she would soon look back at the window and resume her crying as she waited for someone to come and open it to let her in. She was convinced that she knew best and resisted all my efforts to get her to go in through the door. This happened daily for almost two weeks before she began waiting to be let in the right way.

People, too, can be stubborn. Filled with pride, we think we know best. God has the answers to everything, and will aid us in looking past ourselves – if we only ask.

Abbie Kessler – St. Louis, Missouri

I love the imagery here, though Abbie may not have contemplation in mind as the door beneath the windows; but what a perfect metaphor for the doorway to God! The door is right beneath our window of ego consciousness. We see the world through this window, but the window is too small and restricted. Its like looking through a hole in a wooden fence, and seeing the world partially, yet believing your seeing the whole picture. We have to get below the window, we have to transcend the ego to go through the door. The door to God leads to freedom and spaciousness. Jesus said, "Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able." (Luke 13:24) God will help you through the narrow door, "if only we ask."

Rev. Mitch Becker
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