

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time  
October 18, 2009

***Living Within Our Means: Choosing Order Amidst Chaos***

Choosing Spiritual Growth

Romans 8:5-11, 26-27; John 15:1-11

*Jesus said, As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you;  
abide in my love.*

*Jesus said, I am the vine, you are the branches  
Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit,  
because apart from me you can do nothing.*

To abide in Jesus and his love is a matter of choice.  
It is a simple choice of what to do with your mind and your heart,  
a choice which will become evident in the fruit that you bear  
in your life.

But choosing Jesus in the midst of chaos can be a challenge.  
There is much to distract us from the one who loves us.  
Consider our latest technologies,  
which can be both a blessing and a curse.

Technology blesses us by giving us easier access to one another  
to communicate, update, inform, explore, teach, and learn.  
For instance, I started blogging this week,  
posting online reflections on the spiritual life.  
Many of you have read those reflections  
and some have replied with their own thoughts.  
I'm looking forward to much rich conversation in the future.

But sometimes I worry that our human relating  
may become eclipsed by our gadgets.  
Could we be swallowed up and digested into a technological existence  
that replaces personal human contact  
with the pushing of buttons and the reading of screens  
and the viewing of digital images.

It is a paradox:  
We are, at the same time,  
more in touch with one another than any time in history,  
yet less in touch than ever.

Does our enchantment by technology sometimes blind us

to older, more natural ways of relating and being human?

Perhaps you heard the report of the two girls, ages 10 and 12,  
who were trapped in a storm drain during a heavy rain.  
They decided to seek help by using their cell phones  
to update their Facebook statuses,  
rather than, say, calling 911.  
Fortunately, they were saved in the nick of time,  
but the youngsters' fixation on Facebook  
delayed their rescue by hours,  
and could have cost their lives.

Makes you wonder doesn't it?<sup>i</sup>

Then there was the gentleman in Bristol, U.K.,  
who cracked his skull on a low-lying branch  
while simultaneously jogging to work  
and tweeting on his BlackBerry.

True story!

(By the way, Tweeting?

That's the new verb for when you type in your daily minutia  
on the website Twitter.

A BlackBerry is just a fancy cell phone.)

"Head hurts," James Coleman tweeted  
as soon as he got up off the ground.

"Forget how tall I am."<sup>ii</sup>

And he then continued jogging to work.

Strange days we live in.

What is going on with us?

It seems more than just a loss of common sense.  
It feels as if we have lost our bearing, lost touch with our souls.  
As if we are so fragmented and confused  
by the rapidness of change,  
so enticed by every new, bright and shiny thing,  
that we don't know which way is up.

The treadmill is turned up to full speed,  
and we are burning spiritual calories, burning up our souls,  
much faster than we can be re-nourished and re-hydrated.

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The good news of the gospel is that  
in Christ God has set us free.  
free to choose how we will live our lives.

We cannot choose what happens to us,  
but we are freed to choose *what we will do* with what happens.

For Ignatius of Loyola, the goal of the spiritual life was to learn always  
“to choose what better leads to God’s deepening life in me.”

How do we do this? What does this choosing look like?  
In answer, we turn again to the *means of grace*  
through which Christ blesses our lives with his life and love  
which is our deepest nourishment.

There is a lot we could say about spiritual growth,  
but I want to consider two things in particular:  
One is Christian fellowship or companionship.  
The other is prayer.

When it comes to Christian fellowship  
one of the great things about Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
is that this congregation is distinguished by  
a close-knit sense of family.

We care about each other.  
And we reach out and care about new folks in our midst.  
I’ve been hearing this from our new members for years.  
They love the sense of community they find here.

A few years before I became pastor here,  
during the Maloneys’ pastorate,  
the Community Thanksgiving Service  
was held here at GPC.  
The Priest of St. Bonaventure Catholic parish  
was giving the sermon that night.  
In the sermon he commented  
that the first and most interesting thing he noticed  
when coming into the church that evening was,  
“You have coat racks,” he said.  
“You have coat racks!”

That struck him as an unusual blessing, and it told him something.  
Namely, when you come to church,  
you take off your coat and intend to stay a while.

This was apparently not his experience in his Catholic parishes,  
as we might guess by the way the cars are lined up  
in the parking lot during mass

like the start of the Indy 500.  
There is no plan to stick around afterwards for fellowship.

But then let's not knock the Catholic masses –  
at least they're in worship;  
and for that they are to be commended.

A recent study of spirituality in America  
was presented in an article in Parade magazine  
a few Sundays ago.

When the survey asked respondents about their worship attendance,  
only about 30% said they attend once or more in a given week.

Although 45% of respondents considered themselves religious,  
70% of them said they participate in organized religion  
sporadically or not at all.

That means that one-third of the people  
who identified themselves as religious  
were only minimally connected to a community of faith.

But consider this:

in an age in which face to face relating is on the decline,  
in favor of digitized, virtual relating  
one of our greatest means of grace  
is that of *warm-bodied,*  
*face-to-face relationships.*

Not to say that we are *just* warm bodies  
in the pew or the classroom or the fellowship hall,  
but there is something to be said  
for our warm bodies  
all being together in the same place.

That is one of the descriptions of the early church in the book of Acts,  
*"they were always together, praising God in the Temple."*

And the writer of Hebrews urges his church  
*"to consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds,  
not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some,  
but encouraging one another  
and all the more as you see the Day approaching."*

Remember: God entered humanity *in the flesh,*  
he didn't just send a text or a tweet or a Facebook update.

We may use technology to our advantage in many ways.

But virtual community should never fully replace  
being together, in the flesh, as the community of faith.

Our Christian fellowship, in the flesh, is a means of grace.

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But what is it that makes our fellowship Christian?  
What makes our togetherness a source of nourishment for our souls?  
Only one thing: the presence of Christ in our midst  
and our purposeful focus on him.  
If Christ is before my eyes, and Christ before your eyes,  
as we face each other,  
then Christ is between us as we meet.  
Then our meeting become a means of grace,  
a occasion of spiritual strengthening.

So how do we keep Christ ever before our eyes?  
This is where we turn to the other mean of grace  
which is so central to spiritual growth: Prayer.

Prayer in our consumer culture has become  
abbreviated, uni-directional, and shallow.  
Abbreviated, in that we give it so little time, thought, or energy.  
Uni-directional, in that we act as if prayer is a one-way conversation,  
only us talking to God.  
Shallow, because it consists often of a mere laundry list  
of things we need or want from God,  
and perhaps a few promises thrown in on our part  
as bargaining chips.

The author of the Parade article recalled that  
"in previous eras, Americans were on their knees nightly,  
convinced that they had to pray because a higher power  
demanded it."  
But "that conviction has largely evaporated."

Although 51% say they pray daily,  
we might wonder what they are praying about?  
Well, according to the study – "lots of things"  
72% pray for the well-being of others.  
60% for forgiveness.  
27% for personal success.  
21% for money or other material things.

Even though some of these are very commendable things to pray for,  
they all define prayer as "people talking to God."  
Interesting that none of them have to do with "listening to God."

But prayer, as a means of grace,  
is not just a laundry list of needs and wants.  
Prayer is our means of communion with God in Christ.  
The things we ask for are secondary needs.  
*Being in communion with God is our primary need.*

Prayer is about spending enough time in intentional communion with God  
that we learn, as Ignatius wanted,  
“to choose what better leads to God’s deepening life in me.”

So, in closing today, I want to guide you through an exercise of prayer.  
It is the Examen of Consciousness which Ignatius  
taught his students to practice daily,  
so they could learn  
“to choose what better leads to God’s deepening life in [them].”

It is a simple method of prayer, that can take as little as 5 minutes,  
or as long as an hour, depending on how long you have.  
We will spend a shorter amount of time,  
just to introduce this method for your personal use...

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<sup>i</sup> *The Week Magazine*, September 2009

<sup>ii</sup> *The Week Magazine*, September 2009