

Trembling Hearts

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Daniel Smith

At First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, United Church of Christ

On Sunday, September 25, 2005

The Lesson: Philippians 2:1-13

This past Thursday night, I attended a Delegates Assembly of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization at the Temple Salem Seventh Day Adventist Church in Dorchester. GBIO, along with several labor unions and a host of statewide healthcare agencies, gathered to make public their commitment to collect 100,000 signatures on a petition to bring the issue of healthcare access and affordability to the state ballot in November 2006. Those of you who were there know what a deeply inspiring evening it was. During the Assembly, Rabbi Pesner from Temple Israel in Boston framed this commitment in spiritual terms by talking about the upcoming Jewish High Holy Days. Apparently, during these Days of Awe or Days of Repentance or Days of Accountability as they are variously named, rabbis around the world invite their congregations to engage in a spiritual practice called “*cheshbon ha nefesh*”. *Nefesh*, in Hebrew, means soul, whether the soul of the individual or the soul of body politic. *Cheshbon* is the word for accounting. A “*cheshbon ha nefesh*” then is as an accounting of the soul. Rabbi Pesner took the definition a step further. He told us that, in essence, to do a “*cheshbon ha nefesh*” is to do a gut-check. He then invited us to check our guts to make sure we were ready to walk the talk of this commitment and to gather tens of thousands of these signatures. Our souls answered with a resounding yes!

Last week, some of you heard about our work with GBIO as we celebrated the Open Road piece of our four-fold First Church vision. You will be hearing more about it in the weeks and months to come and you will definitely have a chance to sign and collect signatures for yourselves. Today though, we celebrate the Open Spirit part of our vision; I’d like us to ponder in a deeper way this profound idea and practice of the “*cheshbon ha nefesh*”, the gut check. The writer Martin Smith reminds us that “the home of the Spirit is not in the intellect, the realm of concepts of ideas, not in a refined interior sanctum of spirituality, but in the guts, the deep core where our passions have their spring, the place of conflict, confusion, vulnerability and desire.” No matter what our call to the Open Road may be, whether its with GBIO or another social justice ministry, to sustain this work of justice and healing in the world, we must tend to this ongoing inner work of opening our souls to God’s spirit.

From our vision: *“Imagine a church that is as welcoming of God as God is of us, a church discontented with the status quo in its Christian life, a church that studies, prays, practices and praises with receptive hunger, deeper every day. Imagine a church that wants to know about God and to experience God, a church unafraid of diving deep and finding joy. Imagine a church that creatively accompanies and supports its children, youth and adults on the Way of Christ. Imagine a church that respectfully invites others to share its joy, know its Source, and enter the circle of love. Imagine First Church in Cambridge!”*

Two years ago, First Church discerned these words to be a part of “God’s Vision for Us”. I’d like to take a moment now to ponder just how we are doing in living out this piece of the vision. Are we making it manifest in our life and ministry? Are we studying, praying, practicing and praising, with receptive hunger? Are we unafraid of diving deep? Are we finding and sharing God’s joy in our endeavors as a community? We could point to our new program for Adult Faith Formation. Our various small group offerings are drawing people deep into meaningful relationships with one another, with themselves and with God. Our 10 O’clock hour educational series are allowing people to study about our faith. Our morning worship and jazz services are, as ever, an invitation to praise God and to sing new songs in this sometimes strange land of Cambridge, Mass. We can and should be proud of these important offerings. But, our vision of being a church of the Open Spirit calls us to more than programs. At a deeper level, I believe it calls us to a kind of *cheshbon ha nefesh* of our own. More than inviting people to check out this or that programs, we need to be inviting them and us to check our guts, and on a regular basis. As we try to be as welcoming of God as God is of us, we may well learn that the place to start is to welcome God into our very guts, even and most especially when our guts aren’t feeling too good.

I don’t know about you, but when I do a real gut check these days, I find myself feeling several things. Not all of them are good. To be honest, in the wake of Katrina, with the as yet untold damage of Rita, with our country at war, with an administration that insists of giving tax cuts to the rich while slashing social welfare spending for the poor, my guts are a mess right now. My guts are filled with anger. My guts are filled with confusion. For a fleeting moment this week, I even wondered for the first time if our Christian brothers and sisters who preach that the end is near just might be onto something! All the while, my guts are also feeling a growing sense of compassion for my neighbors, near and far: the now estimated 748,000 people without healthcare in Massachusetts, the now millions of evacuees of the Gulf Coast region, or the people and families of those who are off fighting an unnecessary and unjust war. As I read our passage for today, and particularly the line ‘work out your own salvation in fear and trembling,’ I fixated for a time on that word “trembling.” That’s it! That’s the word! That’s the word that sums up the mess I feel when I lift that increasingly thin veil that is the surface of my busy though wonderfully contented daily life. When I give myself a good solid gut check, I realize deep down, my guts have been trembling! My spirit has been trembling! My heart has been trembling! Trembling and fear filled? Well, yes, a bit. Trembling and more alert, more alive, more sensitive to the pain of others and to brokenness of our world. Absolutely! Maybe some of you can relate. Apparently, this is not all bad news. According to Paul, this trembling just might have something to do with our very salvation.

Our Philippians passage offers us some further insight, insight even into the very heart and spirit and guts of Jesus Christ. Verses 6-11 of our passage are known as the Christ hymn. As

Mary noted last week in our Christianity 101 class, it's recognized as one of the first hymns of the Christian church. Paul uses it as part of his invitation to early Christians to imitate Jesus. He writes "let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who (and here the hymns begins) though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." In an act of *kenosis*, or self-emptying, Christ chooses solidarity with humanity over equality with God. He empties himself of his ego, knowing that is how he must distinguish himself and set an example for all to follow. For this, we are told, God exalts him and gives him the name that is above every name! The passage emphasizes a fundamental paradox that is inherent in Christ, and also in each of us. It's inherent in all of our guts! Again, I quote Martin Smith who puts it this way: Human beings have "an ineradicable yearning for two fundamental kinds of experience. One the one hand, for the experience of being accompanied by others, in communion with them, included . . . and on the other hand for the experience of independence and distinctness with initiative all our own." On the one hand then, Jesus was born in human likeness and sought utter communion with all humanity. On the other hand, by emptying himself, by spilling his divine guts and dying a death on the cross, he became distinctive and was exalted. Do you see the paradox? As we seek to have the same mind and love as Jesus, we too might acknowledge these two yearnings within ourselves.

Think about it for a moment. How do these yearnings resonate within you? For me, lately, I find it sometimes when I read the papers. With each headline, I feel myself being called into an ever-deeper sense of spiritual solidarity with those who are most suffering through these tough, tough times. I want to be in communion with them, to cast off over whatever status of privilege I have that could set me apart. At the same time, I want to do something to make a difference, to share the benefits of my education, to share my particular gifts to make the world a better place. And yet how easy it is to feel thwarted! In the case of Katrina, it's geographical distance. In the case of Iraq, it's a lack of political power! Unlike Jesus, we never started out as equals to God. Yesterday, on my way to the auction in Newton, I heard NPR interview a newspaper reporter who along with a few colleagues waited out RITA in Beaumont, Texas. They were committed to doing their job of bringing people the news of what was happening to their town. He wrote on a web log late Friday night, "I'm not sure why we think we might deflect a 500 mile wide hurricane by throwing a scrap of paper worth fifty cents at it. Maybe its like so many things we do in life, it just makes us feel that we did something." Our hearts and spirits are left trembling with compassion. We too yearn to do something each in our own way. Yet no matter how heroic our efforts, we ultimately encounter a sense of our helplessness in the face of storms both natural and human. We ask ourselves too "what can my fifty cent scrap of paper really do?" Again though, this is not necessarily bad news. It might be precisely what opens our spirits and draw us near to our creator, our redeemer and our sustainer.

Mary Oliver, in her poem entitled "The Buddha's Last Instruction", offers some further perspective on this dynamic I'm struggling to spell out. The poem is written in the voice of one who watched and listened as the Buddha breathed his last. Hear it now:

"Make of yourself a light"
said the Buddha,
before he died.
I think of this every morning
as the east begins

to tear off its many clouds
of darkness, to send up the first
signal—a white fan
streaked with pink and violet,
even green.
An old man, he lay down
between two sala trees,
and he might have said anything,
knowing it was his final hour.
The light burns upward,
it thickens and settles over the fields.
Around him, the villagers gathered
and stretched forward to listen.
Even before the sun itself
hangs, disattached, in the blue air,
I am touched everywhere
by its ocean of yellow waves.
No doubt he thought of everything
that had happened in his difficult life.
And then I feel the sun itself
as it blazes over the hills,
like a million flowers on fire—
clearly I'm not needed,
yet I feel myself turning
into something of inexplicable value.
Slowly, beneath the branches,
he raised his head.
He looked into the faces of that frightened crowd.

This person's reflection on all this majesty of nature and also death? "Clearly, I'm not needed! Yet I feel myself turning into something of inexplicable value!" In these days where death, devastation and destruction can seem to have the last word, when we check our guts, we may find ourselves amidst that frightened and trembling crowd. And yet as people of faith, as a church of Open Spirits, we should take heart in the realization that ultimately, we are not needed. We cannot ourselves save the world. Unlike Jesus, we are not equals to God. We are not God. There is some comfort in this fact, no? Our trembling hearts, raw, sensitive and alive coupled with our yearning to offer something, these are the precisely the things that in the presence of God's spirit, can turn us into something of inexplicable value. We can and should do everything humanly possible to offer our unique and distinctive gifts to better our world. We can and should feel compassion and empathy with every living thing. But to do a real *cheshbon ha nefesh* to really open our Spirits, to really check our guts we will find -- beneath the anger, beneath the compassion, beneath the branches our ineradicable yearnings – the source and ground of our being. We will find the assurance that in the most tragic of times, we are not alone. We will hear a simple instruction from the heart of our heart, whether from the Buddha or for us, from Jesus Christ. "Make of yourselves a light!" As the East tears off its many clouds of darkness, let that light that is in you and in every living thing, join with the light that is God in Christ. When we dive deep into our trembling hearts, when we can open our spirits to that abiding light and spirit of God, we will know that we are not alone in this work of salvation. We will find that hope against

hope that our future is secure. We will come to know that, in some ways at least, we are not needed. And there, there we will find the freedom, the love and joy to give ourselves away. When we can dive that deep, we will 'make *[our]* joy complete'!

My friends, let us be a church of Open Spirit. Do a *cheshbone ha nefesh*. Open your spirits. Check your guts. Beyond your deepest yearnings, now yourself and the world as God knows you! And make of yourself a light. Forget not, in the words of the hymn we will soon sing, that God's own face shines in you reflected, calling us back where we belong. Amen.