

Sermon – “Composing a Life”
Scripture Readings – Psalm 131, Romans 5:1-5
Sunday, May 11, 2014
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Our first Scripture reading is Psalm 131. This psalm is a “song of trust.” It is written by someone who has endured the sorrows and disappointments of life. Yet through it all, experiences a quiet, confident faith in a loving God. The ancient Hebrew chose the metaphor of a child in the arms of a mother to describe this complete trust which gives hope to our lives. This is the Word of God.

*“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 marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a child quieted at his mother’s breast;
like a child that is quieted is my soul.
O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and
forevermore.”*

Our second Scripture reading is Romans 5:1-5. These verses introduce a section, which is considered the most important portion of this letter—if not all of Paul’s correspondence. This section concludes with the familiar verses in the eighth chapter of Romans: *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution—No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”* The richness of Paul’s theology is the acknowledgement of a complicated world that is not often fair or just and the affirmation that we have a loving God who is totally for us. This perspective, this rhetoric allows us to compose lives that not only accept the challenges and struggles but also receive strength through them. This is the Word of God.

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

The title of the sermon: “Composing a Life”

The text: “...and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us...” Romans 5:4-5a

Let us pray: We thank you, loving Creator, for the life you have given each of us and for the hope that will not disappoint us. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable to you, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

What a delight it is for me to have our son Paul join Westminster on this Mother's Day and to welcome two new members, Chelsea and Adam, who are expecting their first child. The first Mother's Day sermon I preached following the birth of Paul was a momentous occasion for me. I remember distinctly sharing that as a woman pastor I sometimes used the metaphor of "giving birth" to compare the writing or composing of a sermon. After having the privilege of personally experiencing labor, I wanted to set the record straight. There is absolutely no comparison! These are two very different experiences!

However, the use of metaphor can enrich our understanding of life. The title of today's sermon "Composing a Life" is the title of a book written by Mary Catherine Bateson, the only daughter of Margaret Mead. This book was shared with me the Saturday before Paul came into the world by Carol Webster, the wife of Dr. Art Webster, a dear friend and mentor, who served as the Pastor of Webster Groves Presbyterian Church when I joined their staff almost twenty years ago. In fact, Art called me this week while on my way to the Contact Ministries Board meeting to see if I would speak to a young woman pastor at their church near Chautauqua, New York, who reminds him of me.

Carol delivered the book along with some homemade chicken soup the same day I came home sick from a church officer training retreat. The soup was delicious and much appreciated...a thoughtful gesture...and the title of the book intrigued me precisely because of the metaphor. This was obviously an intentional and well thought out use of words and the book proved to be as interesting as the title.

The author understands life as a work in progress. Through the comparative biographies of five women, Dr. Bateson provides a fascinating framework for her inquiry into the potential of complex lives, where energies are not narrowly focused toward a single ambition but rather are refocused and redefined throughout one's journey.

The affirming conclusion of Dr. Bateson is that life is an improvisational art form and the interruptions, the conflicted priorities and the urgencies that are a part of all of our lives can and should be seen as a source of wisdom, as an essential part of composing strong and creative lives.

This perspective sheds new light on the repetitive tasks and attention to details that are a part of nurturing children and managing a household. Rather than see this work as mundane and necessary, it is celebrated as creative and life giving. Both to those who interrupt because they need to be "calmed and quieted" and to those who are interrupted graciously because they have the strength of character to put another's need before their own.

Of course, the wisdom in this perspective touches all of our lives whether we are managing a household, a business, a practice of a classroom; whether we are nurturing children, caring for aging parents or collaborating with colleagues. Who among us does not experience interruptions or conflicted priorities every day of our lives? And which one of us has not dealt with major losses and disappointments in our professional and personal lives... an unexpected turn of events that changes the direction or colors the composition of the lives we live? The meaning and interpretation we give these interruptions and losses will determine whether they become sources of wisdom.

Dr. Bateson writes, *"when there is a rent in the canvas, a discord in the harmony, a betrayal; it is important not only to recover but to discover a new and inclusive pattern of meaning. Part*

of the task of composing a life is the artist's need to find a way to take what is simply ugly and instead of trying to deny it, to use it in the broader design."

I believe this is *the hope that does not disappoint us* according to the Apostle Paul and *the soul that is calmed and quieted* according to the Ancient Hebrew poet. These two did not need to deny what was simply ugly in their lives because their faith acknowledged the complexity of a world that is often not fair or just.

Likewise, these two were able to take *the rent in the canvas and the discord in the harmony* and use it in the broader design of the lives they composed because they believed with all their strength and mind and heart that the One who created them was totally and completely for them. They believed in the God of hope and the hope of God.

For I am sure, the Apostle Paul writes, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Associate Pastor Nominating Committee is reviewing resumes in our search for two new associate pastors. This week the committee made some decisions and narrowed the field of those they would consider. I was reading a few of the selected resumes and one reflection to a question about a meaningful experience in ministry resonated with me. I would like to share it with you.

My first night on-call as a hospital chaplain was, on paper, the kind of night seminarians discuss in fearful whispers. And yet, it was a night of walking with God. As the rest of the chaplaincy staff left the building, I received calls to three ICU beds: one post-partum comatose patient, one deathbed, and one request from a family for prayer before life-support was turned off for an elderly woman. Shortly after these, the hospital received word that a beloved doctor has unexpectedly died. I spent the night walking the halls, listening to nurses' talk and cry as they remembered their friend and colleague. In the early hours of the morning, I got a final call. The woman who had been taken off life support had died and her daughter wanted to talk. She and I sat with her mother's body. She talked and questioned and grieved. Sometime just before dawn, I realized that we were in a holy space, creating it together, held by God. More than that, I had been held in holy time all night long, from the moment of that first call. She spoke of loss, not only of her mother, but of her own role as caregiver. With my gentle questions, she spoke of her mother's life—the joys and sorrows and unknowns. The woman spoke of her lack of faith, and we talked together about her decision to explore anew the assurances of faith she had left behind. The sun was rising as I offered a closing prayer, and the words of the psalmist came to me: "Weeping endures for the night, but joy comes in the morning."

I have calmed and quieted my soul like a child...

As we compose our lives and the lives of our children, as we move forward in faith together at Westminster, may we discover the holy space we create together, may we be mindful that we are held by the God whose love will not let us go, and may we celebrate the interruptions, the commitments, the sacrifices and the repetitive tasks that give our lives meaning and *a hope that will not disappoint us*. Amen.