

July 29, 2007

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## MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

### LIVING IN THE DEEP END

Matthew 14:25-36

The wind is raging across the water, Jesus walks toward the disciples on the water and Peter, ever eager Peter, leaps out of the boat. Peter, it seems to me, is always one to act before he thinks. I actually like that about him. I think I relate to that in him. We are told that he is standing first on the water and then in the water. As he takes his first steps on that water Peter is first focused on Jesus, but then all too quickly, distracted by the storm, Peter begins to sink. It is a truth for most of us. When we can see Jesus before us, we yearn to stay connected to the Divine in our midst, but all too often we get caught up by the storms of life that are raging all around us and we, too, become distracted.

Let us pray: In these few minutes center us in your presence O God. May your holy spirit refresh us and remind us of your everlasting love.

James Lawson is a man who knows all about the storms of life. He has been at the eye of a storm on more than one occasion. I imagine that most of us have someone in our life who has influenced us significantly. One of those people in my life is Rev. James Lawson. Jim Lawson served as the senior pastor to the Holman United Methodist Church, a large African American church in Los Angeles, while I was also serving in the Los Angeles area. I did not know Rev. Lawson personally. I do not want you to get the wrong idea. We did not dine out together, we did not sit and discuss the problems of the world, but I did watch him from afar. I would listen to his every word when he spoke to issues on the floor of the Annual Conference. He was a leader not only in that conference, but also in the denomination and in the nation. He was at the heart of organizing non-violent resistance with Dr. Martin Luther King in the struggle for civil rights. Though retired now, Reverend Lawson still teaches and continues to lecture at Vanderbilt University.

I was privileged to have Jim Lawson come to Wichita, Kansas while I was serving there to speak about his past with the civil rights movement and the seeking of justice throughout the world today. He was as energetic as ever. He captivated the people who came to hear him speak. I was struck once more by his very nature, his depth of spirituality. Though he has said many words that have stayed with me over the years, the phrase he offered the last time I saw him was, and I quote, "Have you ever noticed how all the noise is at the shallow end of the pool?"

What a wonderful phrase. Not only is it true of the shallow end of a swimming pool, but also the shallow end of spirituality. There, too, you will find plenty of noise, but not much substance.

During this first month of our new relationship together, we have been looking at who we are as ambassadors for Christ. We have considered the importance of our life together as community,

our commitment to reaching beyond ourselves in mission, our dedication to stewardship and today our life long journey with the spirit of God.

Ambassadors for Christ are people of spirit. Theologian, author and inspirational leader, Henri Nouwen once wrote: “The spiritual life has to do with the heart of existence. By heart, I do not mean the seat of our feelings as opposed to the seat of our thoughts; I mean the center of our being, that place where we are most ourselves, where we are most human, where we are most real.” Nouwen went on to say, ‘What does it mean to live spiritually?’ I would have to reply, ‘Living with Jesus at the center.’”

Living with Jesus at our center focuses us not on the distractions of life, not on the noise of life, but rather on the deeper expressions of faith. It seems to me the noise at the shallow end of the pool is like that of the storm facing the disciples. They became anxious and fearful.

I cannot begin to discern the noise in your life, but we all have that clatter that distracts us from our own sense of spirituality, from our center. When I venture to the shallow end of my own spirituality, I find the noise full of questions about myself, of self doubt, nagging unexplained bigotry, unrealistic fears, grudges, gossip-- it is not a pretty place. I venture into the shallow end of my spirituality when I become absorbed with myself, when life becomes all about me, when I place myself at the center of my universe. That is when the chatter of my ego takes over and honestly, the sound can be deafening.

It is within the mysticism of Judaism that I find a deeper understanding of my life of faith and of the spirit of God within us. In the Kabbalah, the Hebrew words for soul lead us to an understanding of the holy breath of God. The word for “spirit” in the Hebrew, “ruach”, is “correlated with emotional awareness. Our ‘spirituality’ is founded upon the ruach level of soul. It inexpressibly moves us to tears when we are touched by a poem, a glance, a work of art, or a simple moment in nature. Love on this level is more real to us and longer lasting. Our senses of purpose and meaning in life depend a great deal upon the extent to which our ruach is nourished.” Rabbi David Cooper

The breath of the Divine lives within each one of us. Spirituality is developing awareness of that breath and in the words of Henri Nouwen, “‘living as the beloved.’ The spiritual life counteracts the countless divisions that pervade our daily life and cause destruction and violence,” writes Nouwen. The barrage of noise in our lives attempts to divert our attention away from our center, from the Divine spirit that is within. Spirituality is the practice of becoming ever more aware of the breath of God within us, ever more centered on the love and grace of Jesus.

Anne LaMott is an author who has written about her spiritual journey in several different books. She is definitely irreverent in her writing, so should you explore her writings, be prepared. However, she writes in her book, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* about a time in her life when she was feeling overwhelmed. She was discouraged and frustrated with the realities in her life and to her dismay her beloved teenage son was acting out. It seemed that wherever she turned she was faced with significant challenges. She writes in her book that she sought the advice of her dear friend, a priest she calls Father Tom. His antidote to her situation was “Left foot, right foot, left foot, breathe.” Left foot, right foot, left foot, breathe.

It is for me the very process by which we move from shallow end to the deeper waters of spirituality. It is by taking our breath that we are drawn anew into the Divine presence, into ruach, the Divine breath. The spirit of God is not only present in the act of breathing, but also in the midst of our stepping out on our left foot, right foot, and the left foot again. If open to it, we find that we are infused by God's spirit. There is no place that we go without that Divine presence. There is nothing we can do that God will not be with us. The spirit of God is with us as we suffer through our most difficult days, our most joyous moments and everything in between. Even when the ego takes over and self-centeredness abounds, the breath of God is with us. Our challenge is the same as Peter's - to stay focused not on the storm around us, not on the noise that attempts to distract us, but on Jesus who loves us.

Faith is the ability to believe in the face of otherwise overwhelming evidence that God is with us, that God cares for us, and God dwells with us. That Divine presence is with us as individuals, but also as community, as the community of Meridian Street United Methodist Church.

For the apostle Paul, spirituality is both an inner personal journey and a community experience. Our relationship with God and our relationship with one another are essential to our developing awareness of the spirit of God within us. It is not only a personal journey, but also a communal one. We grow and experience transformation individually and as the collective body of Christ. Our developing spirituality is relational. The more we stay at a distance from God and from each other, the longer we remain in the shallow end of the faith experience.

For it is in our relationship with the Divine and with one another as we journey in faith together that we find confidence, hope, and blessing. Diving deeper into our relationship with God and others, we discover that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. We become imbedded in the life of the spirit and in the love of God. Over time, we begin to think like Jesus. We live as beloved because we understand the truth of God's love for us. The noise of the world continues around us, but in the deeper place of spirituality, we find hope in the midst of disappointment, comfort in our grief, wonder for our days, and more than enough love for the journey. We find as we step out on our left foot, our right foot, and then our left foot we do not walk alone, we never walk alone. As ambassadors for Christ we live in Divine love and allow that love to motivate our living.

In our baptism, we are eternally bound to God. As we grow in our faith journey, we become ever more attentive to the spirit of God within us and in so doing, begin to live as God's beloved. Consistently engaging in prayer, making space in our lives to just be with God, to consider God's presence as we take a breath are all practices that move us from the shallow end of our faith journey toward a deeper experience of spirituality. We need not run any faster or jump any higher. We need not seek the approval of others or add to our list of titles. We need only to be, to be and receive the Divine embrace that is already offered to us.

As we become ever more defined as the ambassadors for Christ, I pray we find the time and the inspiration to venture out into the deeper waters of our faith as we center our lives on the one who calls us by name and loves us beyond our wildest dreams – Jesus the Christ.

Left foot, right foot, left foot, breathe. Give it a try on your way out of the sanctuary this morning. It may take you a little longer to get to the parking lot, but then when you arrive, you may indeed have a much deeper sense of the presence of God with you – and isn't that why you came to church today? As we live out our faith in this community, may we find Jesus at our center as well that we might grow ever more into the church he envisioned – a people blessed, a people empowered, a people of purpose.