

of God. June 6, 2004/First Sunday after Pentecost
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**Confessions of a People-Pleaser, or
Living the Called Life**

Psalm 146 *Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help...
Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God.*

Galatians 1:10-24 *Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or
am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a
servant of Christ...For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel
that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin.*

Each of us has at least one thing about our personalities, our spirits with which we struggle all our lives. It is like Paul's "thorn in the flesh," something that keeps us painfully humble. At the top of my own list is that I entered adult life as a terrible people pleaser. People pleasing means wanting to make others happy at the expense of your own truth or happiness. It is being addicted to approval, to having others like you. It is defining yourself by jumping through the hoops of "success" held out by society or religion so that you end up not knowing who you really are or what you are really meant to do.

People pleasing distorts our spiritual lives. When I worked as an orderly at Boston Children's Hospital many years ago, there was a young man who came onto our division suffering from seizures. They weren't frequent, but they were quite intense. One day his mother came for a visit. Soon after she left, the young man had a seizure as I entered his room. I put the prescribed apparatus between his teeth and informed the charge nurse. Then I sat by his bed and began talking quietly to him. Before long he started settling down. As he and I talked over the days of his hospitalization, I discovered that he was under great pressure from his mother to enter the priesthood. In fact, his mother seemed to pressure him on several fronts so that he had no sense of his own being, his own self. I never discovered for sure whether I was right, but it seemed to me there was some connection between these seizures and his inner compulsion to please his mother regardless of his own desires.

If our attention is always directed toward what others think or expect of us, then we do not live out of that deep, central part of us where we know our connection, our relationship with God. The spiritual life is reduced to thinking the right religious thoughts or doing the right religious things. We do not experience the freedom and fire, the peace and the purposefulness that arise from our primary relationship with the living God. A spirituality, however, that affirms the responsibility, the work, and the joy of finding one's own relationship with God gives us life and makes us those who give life to the world.

Psalm 146 says that we sing praise to God all our lives because God alone is the source of life, goodness, sustenance, freedom, and care. "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals in whom there is no help." Trust, in the

biblical meaning of the word, cannot be placed in human beings or anything else other than God. Only God is capable of fulfilling our trust, for life itself comes from God, not from any leader or political system or anything else on the human plane. Gordon Cosby calls this putting our taproot down into God rather than the values and systems of the world that give empty promises of meaning and fulfillment.

The psalm tells us that when we are living our lives from the center, from that deep connection we have with God, then we tap into a wellspring of peace, joy, and energy for living a truly rich and meaningful life. Then life begins to take on its true perspective. For all the difficulties and even pain of life, there is an underlying goodness and sacredness—God's mercy, compassion, care, and steadfast love that works for the healing, liberation, and the happiness of all creatures.

This is why we make a commitment to a spiritual life that has some discipline to it, something we practice every day of our lives. The practices of prayer, silence and inner listening, and compassionate self-understanding—these are not a turning away from reality, from the world. They connect us with God's presence and the movement of God's spirit in the world around us and in ourselves. And as we work with this kind of spiritual practice, we find in ourselves a growing song of joy and praise. It doesn't come automatically or easily. It is the fruit of effort to open our hearts, minds and lives to the deeper reality of life. It is the practice of trusting God, of putting the taproot of our spirits down into God.

If we are not living with that kind of joy and praise in the center of our being, then we are not discovering our true identity. Who am I? The psalm answers that I am one who is made by God to live in joy. I am made so that my life flows from the very God who created the universe and sustains its life.

The psalm moves us in the direction of answering a second most important question: What am I to do with my life? If my trust, my very life is drawn from God, then I can live in such a way as to share in God's work of caring for the earth, bringing justice for those for whom God is most concerned—the poor, the oppressed, those deprived of the necessities of life. I can be a channel of God's spirit liberating people from all kinds of prisons. I can participate in God's caring for those who are treated as or feel themselves to be strangers. I can be one who upholds, as the psalm says, the "widow and orphan," which is the biblical way of speaking of all who are vulnerable in society. In short, when I am living from the center where my taproot is in God, I can live in such a way as to enhance life around me.

Paul's words in his Letter to the Galatians continue in the direction of what we are to do with our lives, the outward journey, as we call it. Apparently Paul was accused by some of being a "people pleaser." He was preaching that God's love in Christ embraces the outsiders, those who according to a narrow religious view, don't belong to God. Paul, thoroughly a Jew himself, felt God had called him to take the message of God's love in Christ to non-Jews, to Gentiles. God's liberating love is for everyone, not just for those who have come to see themselves as belonging to a religious inner

circle. God's love is always expanding outward and it takes us with it, if we are listening, if we are ready to go. Maybe that's what some were criticizing Paul for. He was seen, perhaps, as watering down what it means to be religious just so that outsiders would feel welcome.

Paul responds: I am not seeking anyone's approval but God's! My mission is from God and no human being! Sounds brash, doesn't it? But there's something in Paul's bravado that appeals to us at a deep level. We wish I could be that sure. We wish my sense of purpose and direction was that clear. We would love to live with that kind of clarity and sense of inner direction.

The thing is we can do just that. But it comes from a life being lived on that inward journey of trusting God and not human beings. It arises from within us where we are growing deeper into God and increasingly awake to the world as God's creation, sacred and good but in need. That inward journey of the life of prayer is the birthing place of the outward journey, what we are called to do for God and for God's world. Paul found his direction in his encounter with Christ that gave him the mission of going beyond the accepted boundaries of religion with the fire of God's encompassing love. Our encounter with God in Christ will open for us different missions out of that same fire, that same love. And those missions will have to do with our particular gifts and the particular needs around us, with where we are and who we are at this point in our lives.

As proof of his divine calling, Paul offers his life. He is a changed man. He sees things completely different now that he has met Christ, now that his life has become completely centered in the living God. Before he was a zealot protector of the status quo, a defender of religion, its structures and doctrines, to the point of persecuting this new movement, this Jesus movement. Paul Tillich, among others in recent times, has said that Jesus means the end of religion. What I think he meant was that Jesus calls us to a life, not to a religious system. Jesus awakens us to who we truly are as human beings, awakens us to our relationship to the living God, and calls us to live out of that relationship. Paul gives his own life as evidence of this Christ, of this God. He has now become one who lives only to share the Good News of God's love as it is manifest in Christ, an ever-widening circle of God's love that embraces all people.

People who live in this way, from the inside out, from spirits rooted deeply in God, have a way of causing discomfort. They don't tend to ask permission to do what they feel called to do. They take full responsibility for what they feel called to do. And yet in all of this, they try to manifest the very spirit of God's love that they are endeavoring to serve. Paul doesn't feel that he has to go to Jerusalem and ask Peter's permission to do what he is doing. And yet, Paul doesn't turn Peter into an enemy just because they have disagreements. He does end up visiting Peter for a couple of weeks. As we read later in Paul's account, they had a vigorous discussion of Paul's unprecedented embracing of Gentiles. Paul even confronts Peter with what he sees as Peter's hypocrisy and people pleasing. But Paul just stays focused on what he feels he is called to do and gives his life to it.

All of this says to us is that it is so important that each of us discovers what God is calling us to do with our lives, that each of us cultivates an inner life that gives us a sensitivity to God's presence and movements within the uniqueness of our own being. And as we sense that calling, those particular ways God gives us to express God's love for the world, then we go about it with concentration,

commitment, freedom, joy, and a spirit of love. Furthermore, we work at being the kind of community where all of this can happen, where we all find the freedom, the encouragement, and the support to live in response to that particular call that God sounds in our lives.

That's what the Church of the Covenant has endeavored to be over the years, just that kind of community. Not a church that gets all caught up in endless tinkering with structures or perpetuating ourselves as a church, but the kind of community that lives by trusting God alone, as Psalm 146 says, and by always investigating and discerning the call of God in our lives. We need to be aware that even with that vision of the church, we are as susceptible as anyone else to becoming caught up in self-preservation and maintenance. That makes our inward journeys so very important. For Covenant Members this means checking always to see if we are doing our spiritual disciplines out of obligation or just to feel a sense of accomplishment, or if we are working with our spiritual disciplines in order to keep growing in our sensitivity to God's presence and God's call. For all of us, there is no more important commitment, no more important work than that of the continual discovering and deepening our awareness of our identities as those who draw life from God, whose trust is in God alone, and being aware of how God is moving in us to awaken our gifts and reveal to us paths of service.

Pleasing God, not people, is the way of our liberation, our fulfillment, our joy. As we put the taproot of our spirits down into God, not people, not the world around us, we become persons and a community who truly love the world and people with the transforming love of God.