

Sermon, 6 July 2008—Proper 9

Genesis 24:34-67; Psalm 45; Matthew 11:16-9,25-30

I am going to return, this morning, to a familiar reflection on what we are doing in church. I am going to repeat something helpful which I have heard said in many places. Our life has vertical and horizontal components; it needs both; it must have both. The horizontal arm of our life extends us towards other human beings, towards other creatures, towards the wonder of life on this planet. The vertical arm of our life—whether you want to picture going high or going deep—extends us towards God, towards meaning and value, towards what opens us to standards greater than our own on our own.

In the horizontal dimension, who I am is of more importance, because I am the one who makes the contributions, who enters into relationships, who is accountable, who sees myself as part of what is around me and identifies with it, one of the family, one of the gang, one of the species. In the vertical dimension, who I am is of less importance, because I am the one who is passing through, who doesn't see the whole picture, who is fallible and mortal, who sees myself as a stranger in a strange land, in but not of the world, open to what is beyond myself, incomplete and yearning, wondering about God. Both of these arms are necessary if we are to be fully human.

It is so with our nation as well: the horizontal grandeur of our land, the struggles and triumphs of our multitudinous and multihued people, the achievements and shames of our polices, all are given meaning by the vertical values expressed in our Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” The values that are greater

than our nation both judge and support the practices of our nation, as they do of any nation. Human equality is self-evident, we say. Human rights are inalienable, we claim. We affirm that statement, not because we think it applies only to the American enterprise horizontally, but because we believe it is true about the human race vertically as every person has an endowment by that person's Creator.

Many years ago, when I heard these two dimensions talked about, the example was a tent. If a tent is going to stand firm—and only if it stands firm can it provide shelter—the vertical and the horizontal tensions must be in balance. In your life, if your life is going to stand firm, the vertical and horizontal arms must be in balance. But what that actually means is that the horizontal and vertical arms must be in tension. Unless they pull against each other, the tent won't stand up. This means that there is a hidden vertical pull within the horizontal, and a hidden horizontal pull within the vertical that creates the tension that holds the tent tall and broad and open.

In our life, tension arises from what we do not know. We are not tense about what we do understand, but about what we do not understand. We need to be stretched towards what we do not know if we are going to fulfill the purpose for which we are made. Only if I am constantly open to what I do not know in the other person does my horizontal extension thrive; only if I am constantly open to what I do not know about God does my vertical extension thrive.

Now it is true that I still do not know some horizontal things, facts and data, about the other person, but what I really don't know is what makes them themselves, their deep core, their inner value and meaning, which is also a frontier for them, all that vertical dimension where they open out beyond themselves into God. But my relationships with others thrive when I

stretch myself, not to find out more details about them, but somehow to appreciate their vertical dimension, how they also stand before God. We must be careful here. I can idolize someone, be obsessed about them, overload them with value and meaning for *me*, but that is only my attempt to claim them for *my* life, an extension of my fantasies. That has nothing to do with the mystery of their transient solitude before God. Once I understand that they are alone and fragile before God, I can only feel reverence, and I will always find myself standing outside the Temple where they move most deeply.

It is also true that I will always claim to know more and more vertical things, intuitions and revelations, about God—all of us tend to talk expansively and abstractly about God, quite cheerful and complacent about it—but what I really don't know is how God is present in my life, how the events and elements of my life and of the world are sustained and made one, which is the horizontal dimension of God, God unknown, presenting blessing disguised in every facet of life. But my relationship to God thrives when I stretch myself, not to make more grandiose claims which I cannot prove, but somehow to appreciate God's horizontal dimension: God-with-us, the Word-made-flesh. We must be careful here. I can treat God as my domestic, my travel agent, my nurse, but that is only my attempt to claim God for *my* life, an extension of my fantasies. That has nothing to do with the mystery of God's omnipresence, which pervades all things. Once I understand, as the great rabbi Baal Shem Tov said, that “the main thing in prayer is the belief that God fills the whole earth with this glory,” then each creature, from sand to stars, is wondrous, and I will always find myself standing inside the Temple where God moves most deeply.

Only when I look at you and the world without knowing what is true for you can I grow towards you; only when I face God without knowing what is true about God can I grow towards God. There is tension here, but it is painful only if I resist it because it changes my presuppositions. There is also tension when plants stretch out their leaves to the sun. Dear friends, the spiritual life is work, but it is good work, and it is necessary work. When Jesus said, “Come to me, all who labor, and I will give you rest,” he did not mean, “I will put you to sleep;” remember the rest you will have is that you will be harnessed to his yoke, and pull together, not on your own.

Horizontally, what does this look like? When we actually see our world, our friends, our family, with all their beauty and pain, when we see them as themselves and for themselves, what we are seeing is that they exist on their own. I both know and do not know them. I want their good, but do not know what their best good might be. All I can bring to prayer is that I want the best good for them without knowing what that might be to them.

Vertically, what does this look like? Most of you recognize in yourselves a thirst for what is beautiful, even when it exposes the falseness we treasure, a yearning for what brings completeness, even when it costs us leaving behind what we have worked to become, a search for what heals, even when it cuts away from us the infections we protect. Even in all our unknowing about God, we carry in us the recognition of goodness. Even without knowing there is knowing. We know there are moments when we taste what is best—what is good and true and beautiful—and we know we are in those moments, because we feel gratitude. Gratitude is simultaneous with recognition; our burst of gratitude is how we know God is present. God is more familiar to us than we think. All I can bring to prayer is my gratitude for the gifts I have been given without knowing I needed them.

In your bulletin today, between the Psalm and the list of parish concerns, you will find two unfinished sentences. They are intended to help you prepare for the Prayers of the People. There are things in you waiting to be remembered by you. Some of them are painful, distressing, even profound violations of your sense of goodness. Some of them are what keep you alive, what give you joy, what give you hope. Some of them you might want to speak aloud during our prayers.

Most of our requests are about the horizontal dimensions of life: our friends and family, our community, our world. Remember, we do not know how they stand before God. We can only hold them before God, desiring the best for them. We must ask for God's will to be done in them, just as we must ask to have knowledge of God's will for us.

Most of our thanksgivings are about the vertical dimensions of life: our experiences of beauty, of truth, of goodness, things we feel privileged to have been in the presence of, humbled to have received. Remember, none of that gratitude for the great wonder of life means much in the abstract; I must actually hold it and smell it and taste it. Don't give thanks for your imagination; don't give thanks out of obligation; give thanks for what is perishable and transient, but still for this moment shown to you: a window into glory, a sampling of peace, a taste of joy, a ripple of forgiveness. Recognize that all these gifts come to you as a pledge that there is more of the same available to you, and give thanks.

May God tighten our strings into tension so we can sing songs we do not yet know, and so become prepared to share in the glorious harmonies of the spreading breadth, the towering height, and the delving depth of the life of the Trinity, Eternal Source, Only-begotten Word, Life-giving Spirit, one God, whom we hope to enjoy and praise in this life and the life to come.