

A Song of Quiet Trust

Text: Psalm 131:1, 2; Matthew 11:28

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
November 24, 1996

Transcription of the spoken sermon

In this Sunday between seasons, I don't know why, but Psalm 131, a Psalm on which I've never preached, never even thought much about, seemed to strike me. Its simplicity and its beauty washed over me, and it is the text of the morning message. Listen to it again:

O Lord, my heart is not lifted up. My eyes are not raised too high. I do not occupy myself with things too great for me or things too marvelous. I have calmed and quieted my soul as a weaned child with its mother. My soul within me is as a weaned child.

A Song of Quiet Trust. A beautiful expression of deep trust in God. "My heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I'm not involved, engaged in things too great for me" - three negations that point to a kind of candid honest, self-evaluation. This is who I am.

I think it's a rather wholesome acceptance of creaturehood. Not a putting down of oneself because one is human, but an acceptance of oneself as human, therefore as limited, as a person on the way, vulnerable, flawed, yet one who has come to self-awareness and self-acceptance before the face of God.

My heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great or too marvelous for me.

I don't think that's a resignation that simply throws in the towel and says, "Well, whatever will be, will be." I don't think it bespeaks a lack of passionate engagement with life, but I think it is a healthy coming to terms with the fact that one is creature, one is human, and that that is all right.

Some years ago, Ernest Kurtz was here and spoke to us. He is the author of what has been the classic statement of Alcoholics Anonymous' philosophy and understanding, and the book in which he gives that rather profound analysis he entitled *Not God*. Strange title. *Not God*, because it was his understanding that, at the root of our human dilemma, is the fact that we would be God and that the thing that is imperative for us to discover is that we are not God and that, rather,

we must live one day at a time in dependency on a Higher Power. Translate that as you will.

My heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I'm not caught up in things too great for me. Just, here I am; this is who I am; God knows.

That kind of wholesome self-acceptance and self-declaration is elicited from the person who has found that one can trust God. The image that is used for God is a bold image. It is very likely that the Psalmist was a woman. How could any man write of the intimacy of the mother with the weaned child on her hip or on her lap or embraced in her arms? The weaned child, literally, the child perhaps two to five years old that had been nursed at the breast but was there no longer, who had known enough, however, long enough to return there again and again for nurture and security and feeding, the weaned child. The Psalmist says, "My soul within me is as a weaned child in the embrace of her mother."

It's not an isolated reference to God as Mother. Another Psalmist said, in Psalm 103, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. He knows our frame. He remembers that we are dust." So, it's not as though it is motherhood against fatherhood, but there is something about motherhood; it is the ultimate, it is the ultimate in that inter-human relationship of utter dependency and utter trust. Only a mother. God as Mother.

Isaiah understood that. He said, in the 49th chapter, "Zion said, 'The Lord has forsaken me. My God has forgotten me.'" To which the Word of the Lord comes: "Can a woman forget her nursing child or show no compassion to the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. I have engraven you on the palms of my hands."

That God is the God in whom the Psalmist trusted so much that he could come to a healthy self-acceptance and a total resting dependence. He could say, "I have calmed and quieted my soul." A wonderful place to be.

Walter Brueggemann says life is lived between orientation and disorientation and new orientation. He groups the Psalms in those three categories. This is a Psalm of orientation. God guarantees the solidarity of things and the solidity of things. Life secure, serene. The first verb in verse two in Psalm 131 is to even or to smooth. This is life when everything is going smoothly and I simply come to an awareness of my total trust in God Who is Mother.

It's interesting that that kind of God has often been lost sight of. Sigmund Freud points to most of the dysfunction within our human existence as being the consequence of that hatred of the father, that father complex. In fact, Freud says that God is an illusion; God is the projection of our earthly father, the father against whom we rebel, the father from whom we must be liberated, set free. Much of our problem is because there is a secret desire to kill the father in order to find our autonomy. Well, Freud didn't make all that up; he observed acutely

the human situation. He saw what is there for anyone to see, that bad religion can really twist a human person, distort the human experience. A mis-concept of God can be devastating to the health of a human being. Freud was reacting against the God that too often the Church has put forth: the stern, controlling father. But he missed the mark in terms of the biblical God, the God of Israel, the God whom Jesus reflected, the God who is like a compassionate father, who is mother-like, whose bosom embraces in an unconditional love that will never forsake and never abandon, a love against which there is no fight, against which there is nothing to rebel, a deep abyss of love.

Douglas John Hall who was with us last June, speaks about the nature of God Who is gracious, and he suggests that we have missed it often in the Church because we have listed all of the divine attributes, all of the perfections of God, all of the ways in which God is the high and exalted One, distinguished from us, the Holy Other One. Then we list all of those attributes of God - one of which is grace. But, then grace has to be balanced with justice and with righteousness and on down the line, as though grace is one thing about God over against other things about God, as though all of those divine perfections somehow or other have to be taken into account. I like what he has to say.

He says grace is not one attribute of God along with others. Grace is foundational, absolutely fundamental. It is the ground out of which all of the divine perfections flow and in terms of which they must be understood. Grace at the heart of things, you see. And that the Psalmist experienced - God like a mother, a mother into whose arms one can always run, upon whose lap one can always dwell secure, is a true portrait of the biblical God. "My heart is not lifted up, my eyes not raised too high." I don't get caught up in all sorts of great schemes. I come to an honest self-evaluation and esteem as one who with genuine humility can simply be in the bosom of God.

How does one come to such an experience? Well, I would suggest not in splendid isolation, but rather, in tangible community. I do believe it is in the community of God's people that we come to the tangible touch of that God of all mercy.

Nancy and I experienced that last week, last Sunday. We were in New York City. The week before we were in New Jersey where I had to speak at an event, and there was a pastor from New York present to whom I said, "We're going to come back. Tell me a restaurant; tell me a show." Well, we ended up engaged with this pastor. When we got to New Jersey the previous week, *The New York Times* had a big article with pictures about Middle Collegiate Church and the title was "Old Time Religion With a New Twist." Because the pastor had been very gracious to us, we thought it would be good to worship there, in the East Village, into 2nd Avenue, Sixth Street. Old Middle Collegiate, partner with Marble Collegiate and West End Collegiate, the old, ancient collegiate system of Reformed churches in the city. This one twelve years ago was ready to be closed, about 25 people left. Gordon Dragt was called there and somehow or other by the grace of God, was

used to build a community. We worshiped with them last Sunday and I've got to tell you - we were deeply moved by the community. When we walked in 15 minutes or so before the service, there was a marvelous jazz combo playing, black and white together. And as we sat there and enjoyed that, we saw the people stream in; there were black people and white people, there were old men and young women, there were married couples, husband and wife; there were Gay couples, Lesbian couples, there were children, young people, and there were hugs all around. It was obvious that when they came into that sanctuary, they were coming to their family and the grace was tangible and the love was obvious, and one couldn't help but experience in that community that all of the diversity of the human family, all of those differences really don't matter! They don't matter, you see, because that which transcends it all is that solidarity in our humanity, that humanity that is loved by God, that humanity that is nurtured by the grace of God and embraced in the bosom of God, so that all human differences really don't matter at all. I understand why, in the East Village in New York City, there is the rebirth of a congregation, the sanctuary now full, because when we walked in, there was the touch of grace, and the reality of grace in the tangible, human embrace.

Gordon didn't really know I was coming, but the theme of the sermon was grace, and the biblical story was the story of the prodigal son. The whole service bespoke a conception of God as Mother, as Lover. You see, the nature of God as we understand it, will determine the nature of community as we experience it. When God is rested in as Mother, then that people gathered will be a warm womb, pulsating with compassion, able to embrace the whole human family in a wonderful feast of love.

The week before in New Jersey, we spent Friday evening with a pastor and his wife and some other people who had been organizing the event. We learned that for this pastor and his wife it was a second marriage, that she was the daughter of an Ivy League professor who was an atheist, and that she grew up in the home of an atheist and just sort of took that for granted, then one day met this minister and, horror of horrors, fell in love! I mean, if you're an atheist, don't fall in love with a minister. And if you're a minister, don't fall in love with an atheist. Well, she was there on Saturday and when I was asked a question about whether God's grace extends to non-believers, I said, "You know, I don't really find a lot of non-believers. I find a lot of people who are outside of the Church, but I don't find a lot of people who don't have a deep spiritual hunger, a yearning, and I find that if I don't have a package to give to them, that there is an openness, a desire to speak of God because there is that deep yearning after God within us." And I caught her eye at that moment. Then after the event, at another home with some couples, we were about to take our leave and the pastor came to me and said, naming his wife, "She says if I will take her to Christ Community, and if you will baptize her, she would like to be baptized."

I was deeply moved, and I knew again that it is that irresistible grace that alone beckons and enables us to lay down our arms and, in total dependence, calm and quiet our souls in absolute trust. That's really where it is, and those of you who've come in today to this community have come in committed to that kind of community, have come in because there was that grace, and have come in to say such a place must be because it's in community that finally we learn that, at the heart of things, the ultimate reality is a love that will never let us go. That's the good news.