

Rock Solid – Soft Center

Meditation for Marvin Bottema

Text: Psalm 16: 8; Romans 8: 31, 35-39

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Prepared text of the meditation

I suspect, to the extent that you know Marv Bottema well, you will understand why I have entitled my meditation “Rock Solid – Soft Center.” Does that not describe him? Was he not solid as a rock – settled, secure, unmovable when it came to his trust, his values, his commitments? He was the rock solid center of his family and, throughout his life, responsible, dependable faithful. Of course, it was in his genes. Son of Gerrit and Johanna could be no less. But it was more than that; his life was deeply rooted in God, the God of the Psalmist, the God revealed in Jesus Christ.

As always, I chose the Scripture lessons that were reflected in his life. They happen to be among my favorite passages as well, but they were chosen because they were lived out concretely in Marvin’s life.

Psalm 16:8 – I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

The English translation misses the image of the Hebrew text which is, literally, “before my face” –

I keep the Lord always before my face.

What do you suppose the Psalmist is saying? God fully in his consciousness 24/7? Probably not. I don’t even know what that would be, what that would entail. This is poetry and don’t you suppose the poet is trying to bring to expression the fact that his whole being is shaped by his awareness at deep moments that, aware or not, he lives in a “God-shaped” reality? God is the source, ground and goal of all being. The poet believes that, trusts that.

Paul on one occasion speaks of God in whom “we live and move and have our being.” God, the unspoken Presence, the backdrop, the foundation that gives us our being so that there is no secular and sacred. And we don’t have to signal in every situation, every conversation, that God fills our mind and heart.

In fact, I'm a bit allergic to those pious ones whose language is replete with God's latest miracle in their lives. This was not my friend, Marvin. No, his deep-seated spiritual grounding did not need to be expressed; it was simply the constant center of his being. It informed the total experience of his life in labor and leisure, in the family or at Burger King.

He got a head start; he chose his parents well. His traditioning, his spiritual formation, was deep; it started early. And, when it is deep and authentic, one never gets away from it. One doesn't put it on like a Sunday suit (although Sunday suits are not put on so much either anymore!)

I am perhaps belaboring the point but, as I too grow older and can see the end, I become acutely aware of the critical importance of early formation, being nurtured through a lifetime of worship in the community of God's people.

That was Marv's story. A life of faith in family and church and community – in Sunday school, consistory, and keeping the spotlight on the church Bell Tower.

He loved the church. He hung in there a long time. On day I was in Grand Haven and received a call on my cell phone. The Cross was coming down. Since I was close I drove over and parked at the edge of the parking lot as the bucket truck was getting into position. I thought of Marv whose scrapbooks were filled with local history of community and church. I called him – 842 2958 – one of the numbers in my mental file. In hardly any time his pickup drove up. He moved with more quickness than I had seen him move for some time. His camera at the ready, he documented the event – for him a cause for great sadness. In Marvin I saw how much so many had invested their lives in the church community. I saw how much he and so many cared. I felt his loss.

This is just one vignette illustrative of the deep spiritual rootedness, commitment and devotion of this one whose life we celebrate today. I will think of him on Good Friday when I hear the cross will be placed again on the Bell Tower. He will be pleased – maybe even joining the angel choir for an anthem – Lift High the Cross!

I have set the Lord always before me...

Thus sang the poet; Marv's life said an Amen to that.

Rock solid he was, immersed as he was in a God-consciousness that needed not to be spoken about because it showed all over.

And the story gets even better: *He had a soft center*. Was there anything he wouldn't do for his children or grandchildren? Many the times I stopped by and one of you was borrowing or bringing back the pickup or the Pontiac. Or maybe buying a new washer and dryer for the farmhouse. And those are just a couple of

instances I can remember, but it was a way of life. He never ceased caring, providing, aiding in any way he could because he was soft at the center – a pushover as it were – and that was no accident. By “Soft at the Center,” I mean there was Love at the Center.

The Epistle lesson, Romans 8:31, 35-39, expresses beautifully exactly what we have been talking about from Psalm 16. For the Psalmist – *The Lord always before my face* – was described by St. Paul as the God who is “for us.” And further:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

And then he lists the possible assaults on our human condition and concludes,

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

And then one of the most beautiful acclamations from the apostle:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, 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 Jesus Christ our Lord.

Marvin was soft at the center for his whole universe was soft at the center. The center is Love; the last word is love. Love is the final reality – as the writer of the first letter of John affirmed – God is Love. And nothing will separate us from that love – nothing in life, nothing in death.

With God always before one’s face, the God who is love, one grows rock solid in all life’s circumstances, while being soft at the center, emulating the God who keeps us in all life’s experience secure in Love Divine.

One more thing:

I must say to you – sons and daughters, grandchildren – you are a very beautiful family. When I would say to Marv, “You have wonderful kids,” he would say, “That was Thelma’s doing.” And I would suggest he was probably a little bit responsible as well. But my point is you have returned the love and care that you learned from your parents. It always warmed my heart to witness it.

I will miss him and I will miss you. We have had some beautiful moments – around the kitchen table, on the deck, in the yard celebrating the sacraments of Baptism and The Lord’s Supper. You are a wonderful

family. Stay close. Keep alive those meaningful traditions and celebrations we have shared. I have come to love you very much.

And so we say farewell, good and faithful servant – Rock Solid/Soft Center. He has entered into light eternal, into the joy of the Lord, together again with all he loved and lost awhile.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.