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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
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Psalm 93 (Inclusive Version); Matthew 14:22-27
“Surfing, God, and Church”

When I arrived at this church four years ago the Marin IJ got wind of the fact that I was a surfer and did a feature on Redwoods Presbyterian Church’s surfing pastor. I was invited into their studio with my surfboard and liturgical garb for a photo which they have printed on a number of occasions since then.

I haven’t made much of surfing in my time here so I thought I’d say something today about surfing, God, and the church. It seemed a fit for homecoming and I did go surfing at Pacifica on Labor Day.

In a nutshell, surfing is oneness of body, board and wave. Christianity is oneness of human beings, Jesus and God.

We surf the best when body, board and wave become one. If “body,” is a human being inspired by the Spirit, the “surfboard” Jesus, and the “wave” God, then Jesus connects us to God just as a surfboard connects the body to a wave. In and through Jesus we become one with God.

This is central to my theology of surfing and it’s no surprise that it’s Reformed and Presbyterian. It’s Trinitarian. I love the trinity. There’s a communal dimension to the Godhead. It’s relational and Christianity is centrally about relationships – our relationship with God in Christ inspired by the Holy Spirit and our relationship with each other and the earth.

Our oneness with God is the first lesson of surfing. The second is the joy and bliss of being in the water enjoying the splash of the waves and the environment. I’ve been in many amazing surfing environments. In the ocean, one is held by the silky palm of creation and pelicans, seagulls and other sea birds fly by. One experiences liquid reflections of sunrises and sunsets. There’s an amazing array of occurrences that impresses on one the beauty of God’s creation. The only response for me is praise like today’s Litany of Praise and like the psalmist who prays in today’s reading:

“More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters,
more majestic than the waves of the sea,
majestic on high is God!”

Surfing is an invitation to praise God and challenges us to be good stewards of God’s beautiful creation.

I would never know that praise of God as I know God was possible if I did not go to church so the third lesson of surfing is an appreciation of the church where I learn to give God the glory for the great things God has done and it's the place where I am challenged to take care of God's earth.

The same Psalm concludes with a beautiful affirmation of God's house, the synagogue for Jews and the church for Christians.

"Your decrees are very sure;
holiness befits your house,
O God, forevermore."

Decrees are God's designs for human beings and our world heard and studied within God's holy house.

Fourth, a word about the surfboard: A surfboard is a tool of the trade; the better the tool the finer the work. My long board which is fairly new is the best surfboard I have owned in my life. It almost rides for me. If the surfboard is an analogy for Jesus he is the best we have for our relationship with God, our fellow human beings and the cosmos. The cover quote fittingly states that the "church is the human outworking of the person of Jesus Christ."

Fifth, the sea is a medium for spirituality. In the gospel story today it's no coincidence that Jesus walks on the Sea of Galilee after he spends an evening in prayer. He is so connected with God that his disciples see him as walking on water and thus they tell this story. Of course it didn't happen that way literally.

The closest one gets to walking on water is surfing or water skiing. A delightful and empowering movie on surfing and Christianity is called "Walking on Water." The Christian faith is gently and meaningfully brought into the movie.

The gospel story today makes the point that if one spends quality time with God one can go through storms and stay afloat. Sunday worship is quality time with God. Bible study is quality time with God. All work in and through the church is quality time with God. Every online member and friend of the church this week received the link for the new Redwoods-sponsored, nine month practice in contemplative prayer. Travelers on this journey will practice in their own time and space and meet once a month after worship with others on the journey if they choose. This is quality time with God.

Quality time with God leads to quality time in all of life. One's life is immeasurably enhanced in every endeavor: home, work, theatre, hikes, cycling, surfing and other sports, etc.

Six and finally, my relationship to the ocean which has come through a billion encounters with briny breakers has become an important part of my unconscious. Maybe I'm drawn to the sea because of this. The same could happen to you with mountains, lakes, forests or deserts.

I am grateful that this was drawn to my attention by Morton Kelsey, former Notre Dame University and SFTS professor in religion and Jungian dream expert. I did a semester course with him when I was at seminary 28 years ago. During that time I shared privately with him a disturbing dream I just had.

In my dream I was sitting on a beach and the ocean was terribly polluted with tons of discarded debris, dead animals and birds. I forget how Kelsey helped me integrate the negative aspects of the dream. According to Jung, bad or scary aspects of dreams are often one's shadow which is good to face and integrate for greater wholeness.

Kelsey concluded the session with a statement that shaped the rest of my life. He said I needed to be close to the ocean to be a whole person. I was about to look for my first church as a seminary graduate and he encouraged me to look for churches close to the sea. He said I needed to visit the sea for peace. Subsequently, I have served churches in Florida and coastal New York and California.

The point here is to pay attention to your dreams in order to hear God's word to you and to be obedient to that word the best you can.

During the week I searched online for quotes on "church." I was amazed with the lack of understanding of the church. Considering what I have said in this sermon I was drawn to a quote by Paula Deen. I have no idea who she is. She says: "I'm more spiritual than I am religious. I don't go to church; I go to the beach." One can test the "spiritual/religious" comparison at a workshop in San Rafael later in the month. Details are in the happenings on page five of the bulletin. I think it's a false dichotomy but a worthwhile conversation.

It's worth looking at Deen's statement: "I don't go to church; I go to the beach." I'm sorry that Deen feels this way because she's missing a lot. I was on the beach last Monday and experienced the wonderful things stated in this sermon precisely because I "go to church." More accurately, we are the church, I am the church and I attend worship weekly and participate in church activities and that, in the words of poet Robert Frost, "...has made all the difference." Amen.