

Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
June 30, 2013

Psalm 85:6-13; Matthew 7:7-12
"Finding God"

From time to time I come across an article that I think would make a good sermon. I've written and preached about 1,000 sermons and only once have I preached a sermon which was verbatim an article I read. It was a Thanksgiving sermon and I might repeat it one day.

Recently, I read an article which I thought would make a good sermon and decided to preach it. It was written by John M. Mulder and it appeared in the June 10, 2013 edition of the magazine "The Presbyterian Outlook."

This is Mulder's story:

"At the dawn of the 20th century, the philosopher and psychologist William James published *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, one of the 10 most important religious books published by an American author.

"In the book, James distinguishes between the once-born and the twice-born. The once-born, he says, never know deep traumas in life. They go from strength to strength. In a nice turn of phrase, he says these people are born with two bottles of champagne to their credit.

"In contrast, the twice-born know what it means to descend into the depths of despair and meaninglessness, and yet they come out of the other side – stronger and more able to handle the vicissitudes of life.

"I always considered myself one of the once-born. One might say I was predestined to be a Presbyterian. I was born, baptized and confirmed in the Presbyterian Church. I was ordained to be a Presbyterian minister. Aside from a brief and intense period in college when I entertained some serious doubts about my faith, there really was no time when I thought I was not a Christian or didn't want to be a Christian.

"When our two children were born, they were baptized in the Presbyterian Church. I taught for seven years at Princeton Theological Seminary and then became the president of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

"I published articles, reviews and books about Christianity and the Presbyterian Church. I preached and taught in many churches throughout the U.S. I raised a substantial amount of money for Louisville Seminary, one of the fine seminaries of the Presbyterian Church, and helped rebuild its faculty, administration and board of trustees.

"Still, I thought of myself as once-born – a person who never knew himself as anything but a Christian.

“Then, I crashed. It was September 11, 2002 – exactly one year after the World Trade Center towers came down. I was physically, emotionally, spiritually broken.

“My crash, I later learned, was the result of undiagnosed bipolar illness and a pattern of drinking that had progressed into full-blown alcoholism. But I was also morally broken. Alcohol had eroded my moral core and my moral code, and I had done things that were wrong and made me deeply ashamed.

“I had to resign as president of Louisville Seminary, and in the following year I struggled to deal with the physical, spiritual and moral wreckage of my life. I went to 12-step meetings, and I drifted in and out of abstinence – sometimes for four weeks, sometimes for six weeks, but never more than two months. All the while, I prayed, ‘Please Lord, forgive me.’

“Finally, a friend and fellow alcoholic, my doctor and my wife convinced me that I could never get sober without going into treatment. With a heavy heart and an anguished conscience, I left for a rehab program in Atlanta. All the while, I prayed, ‘Please God, forgive me.’

“When I arrived, one of the counselors described me as carrying ‘a toxic level of shame and guilt.’ And I continued to pray, ‘Please Lord, forgive me.’

“Nothing happened. I had no sense of God’s forgiveness. I had no sense of God’s love. As another counselor said, I was ‘spiritually bankrupt.’

“After two months in treatment and after praying continuously for God’s forgiveness and the forgiveness of others, I simply gave up that prayer. Instead, I prayed, ‘God open me up. Please open me up.’

“I am not exactly sure why I prayed that prayer, except that I had reached the end of my rope and didn’t know anything else to say.

“On the morning of December 9, 2003, I was making breakfast in the little kitchenette of the apartment I shared with three other men. They were still sleeping; I was spreading peanut butter on an English muffin, when suddenly I was surrounded by white light. It was not blinding or frightening but warm and embracing. At first, there were no voices or sounds, but as the light subsided, I eventually heard, ‘You are not alone.’ And then the light faded.

“The staff at the treatment center told me later that this event marked the beginning of my recovery. After I told my story in one of the small groups, the counselor, who was a Jew, said, ‘All right. Get on with it.’ That’s an Old Testament way of summing it up: God says, ‘Turn around. Get on with it.’ It’s a perfect way of describing what it means to find God.

“That encounter with God made a huge difference in my life. It was a return from what was surely a form of physical dying and a spiritual and emotional death. I had been dead to myself, to others and to God. I had prayed for more than a year for God’s forgiveness, but then I gave up and prayed: ‘God, open me up.’ Only after I prayed to be open to God did God again become part of my life.

“Since then my life has been different. Most of the people I have wronged have forgiven me, and we have been reconciled. Those in my family, especially my wife, have recognized my sorrow at what I have done and welcomed me back to life and health.

“What I knew intellectually about Christianity has traveled what’s called the longest distance in the world – the 18 inches from my head to my heart. It’s like talking about Jesus for years and then, suddenly, meeting him personally.

“What I have realized is that God didn’t simply want my repentance in exchange for God’s forgiveness. No, God didn’t want a transaction; God wanted a relationship. With me. Just as I am. Only after experiencing God’s presence did I know God’s forgiveness.

“Was it a conversion? Maybe, maybe not. Before my epiphany, my life and ministry had been so abundantly blessed by God, and surely that means I had some relationship with God. But at some point, I walked into the swamp, and there I found God again.

“With the help of my wife and my family and wonderful friends, I began to walk the path in what 12 Step groups call “the sunshine of the spirit.” Perhaps the best way of describing my experience is that it was the most powerful moment in my continuing conversion. And it came in an epiphany from God.

“It all began with a simple prayer: ‘God, open me up.’

“These are the words of Jesus: “Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Matthew 7:7-8)

“We are not alone.” Amen