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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
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Matthew 5:1-16
“Luminous Experiences”

The text just read by Nancy combines readings from this week and last week's lectionary selections. This sermon was inspired from a question asked at the last prayer support meeting – the last Sunday of January after the worship service.

Seven of us gathered. The topics we discussed are published in the Redwoods Log and posted online. You can go to redwoodspres.org and see the topics so far practiced – four in all – by clicking on to the newsletter link. If you do not have a computer, Mari, or I will print you a copy of any of the topics.

In our gathering, we discussed the prayer emphasis of the past month and practiced this month's emphasis. Last month's practice was “prayer as a devotional experience.” This month it is “meditation.”

In one devotional approach, we encourage participants to read carefully selected literature and before reading to ask God to show you what God wants to show in the reading. You are seeking God's will and plan for your life.

Uppermost in the reader's mind is not a scholarly problem to be solved, or an imaginary tale to unfold, but a deeply authentic personal message to hear, and action to take.

We read until a luminous phrase lets important light shine through us. In its relationship to meditation, devotional reading is something like the starter on a car. It is no longer of much use when the motor has taken hold and is running well.

When a significant insight appears, even though in a brief phrase or sentence, it is time to declare a vacation from further reading in order to assimilate that one thing of most importance.

One day in 1209, when Francis of Assisi went into a church, he heard the reading of the scripture, “Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money” (Luke 9:3). That day he knew that he had found the direction for his life. Bonhoeffer felt that a single word – like “God”, “love”, or “mercy” or “cross” – might be enough to fill far more than the time we have for meditation.

Today's scripture reading is excellent for a devotional experience. Well-chosen devotional readings like this have comparatively few barren passages. When the lectionary produced the passage today from Matthew I thought about the question in the prayer support group.

A member said, "If one chooses to read the Beatitudes and no word or phrase becomes immediately luminous, then what?" Knowing this chapter in the Bible I encouraged her to read on because I knew that something would light up in the next verses. Retrospectively, I could have encouraged her to prayerfully reread the Beatitudes until something became luminous and then meditate on what was given.

I encouraged her to move on because the following verses can easily be luminous for a reader. In other words, it could easily be what God wants to say to us. The verses read:

"You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled underfoot.

"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God/Abba in heaven.

How are we "salt of the earth" and how are we "the light of the world?" There must something here on which to mediate. If this speaks to you, I encourage you to spend more personal time with these words or with the Beatitudes.

The prayer support group is one of the ministries of this church. We will receive the annual reports during the congregational meeting immediately after this worship service and therein you will see all the ministries and work of this church. You will see that the prayer support group is not even one hundredth of what we do to the glory of God here at Redwoods.

The Executive Director of Project Homecoming in New Orleans, Jean Mari Peacock, former vice moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), spoke to commissioners and guests at the Redwoods Presbytery meeting last weekend. She said that Project Homecoming is rebuilding and renovating houses damaged by Katrina. They work with volunteers every week of the year and she invited members to volunteer irrespective of skills or experience. They work with site managers for as long as they can. Food and shelter is provided.

What struck me most, what was most luminous for me in her talk was the project's motto, which says, "Committed to Building Faith." Here, Presbyterians are erecting walls, installing windows, laying down roofs and hammering nails and what are they doing? They are building faith. That is what we do here at Redwoods.

When you look at our annual report, you will see that we are building faith. In this context, we affirm the continuation of the luminous phrase from scripture. "You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to God in heaven." The annual meeting today celebrates our good works to God's glory.

This ends my sermon, but allow me to add that the concept of *devotional reading* can be expanded to other kinds of stimuli. God is trying to say a great deal to us through forms of *devotional seeing* other than the printed page, as in sunsets, chapel windows, or children's faces.

There can be *devotional listening* to music or laughter or sermons. The singing of birds or the chirping of crickets can become the equivalent of an organ prelude calling us to worship. We can have a meaningful devotional experience when we touch a baby's hand or the bark of a tree. We might even think of *devotional tasting* as in Holy Communion or in good food – or *devotional smelling* of incense or flowers.

French philosopher and Jesuit priest, Teilhard de Chardin, observed, "God is inexhaustibly attainable in the totality of our action... There is a sense in which God is at the tip of my pen, my spade, my brush, my needle." We may add our keyboard.

Instead of sitting in a quiet room reading, we might visit an airport, farm, and movie theatre or concert hall. Beyond physical sense experience, all our sensibilities can be involved, including our emotional and intellectual capacities. In experiences of love, intuition, creative thinking, or aesthetic response, the whole person can be devotionally alert to the guidance of God.

Use experiences as pointers to deeper meanings. Ask a series of questions behind the questions, moving from "What is this?" to more ultimate reflections like "What is the plan of God?" We see nothing completely for what it really is until we see it in its total context, which is to say until we relate it to God. Amen.