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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
Larkspur, California
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“Summer Scenarios”

I will read the scriptural selections listed here *during* the sermon instead of reading them first and then repeating them in the sermon. As is my tradition, my sermon following my vacation will contain spiritual insights I garnered during the vacation. They come today in four “summer scenarios.”

Scenario 1:

Driving through cornfields to Suellen’s hometown, Rensselaer, with Suellen’s sister, Jane, I snapped a picture of the cornfields with the town’s water tower and bright, white fluffy clouds in the background and showed the picture to Jane. She said, “It’s amazing how we take this for granted,” which reminded me of a conversation we had earlier with her in-laws about Thornton Wilder’s play, *Our Town*.

In the play, the recently deceased Emily has an opportunity to visit her hometown incognito. She is so taken with the brilliance of every detail and remarks before she departs, “I didn't realize. All that was going on in life and we never noticed...Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you...Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it - every, every minute?”

The first biblical passage that came to my mind in this context was Matthew 6:28b-34. Jesus says, “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

Many details in nature communicate God’s glory and show us God’s way to live our lives. When we stop, look, listen and meditate for a while on what we see in the world and scripture we enrich our lives and God gives us insights. I pray that I can, we can, have a greater ability to see like Matthew and the heavenly visitor to earth, Emily, in Wilder’s brilliant play.

Scenario 2:

Suellen, Jane and I visited a Chautauqua situated between Rensselaer and Remington, in Indiana. A Chautauqua brings speakers, teachers, musicians, entertainers, preachers and specialist of the day to rural America. We attended a bluegrass concert. During the concert one of the musicians said that bluegrass bands have a code for their repertoire. The code is one kill song, one train song and one orphan song. I wondered what the code was for Christians. What is the sum of our faith? I concluded it was Jesus's life, death and resurrection. Jesus says in John 11:25-26, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." The Christian life has its fullest expression in faithful living, dying, and rising in Christ. It begins with life and ends with life.

Scenario 3:

We visited Suellen's high school friend in Lafayette, Indiana. She told us that her 19-year-old grandson had just come out of jail. He served one year for stealing a car. He was traveling up from Florida to live with her and to rebuild his life. She said she went to a Chinese restaurant at the weekend and while she had never taken seriously messages from a fortune cookie, this one read, "Your ability to love will help a child in need." I call this a Jesus moment akin to the terrified disciples gathering after the crucifixion and the resurrected Jesus suddenly appears in their midst and says, "Peace be with you." (Luke 24:36).

The biblical story continues, "They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.

While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence. Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.'

"Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God." (Luke 24:37-53)

The crux of this passage communicates that the concrete expression of the resurrected Christ and his continued life and ministry are found in God's people. Jesus encourages caring in his request for food. We attended worship with Suellen's friend in her Presbyterian church and even the sermon of the day spoke to her as she prepared to receive her grandson. God appears in interesting places and works in wonderful and mysterious ways.

Somewhat akin to the gospel story just read, I visited Old First Presbyterian Church, on Van Ness Avenue recently. I served there as an interim pastor in 2001. A member told me she remembers a story I told in one of my sermons and asked me to repeat it. It was a "Jesus moment" story where a hungry man with fish in his hands in South Africa asked me for bread. After leaving my home with some slices of bread, I saw him eating his food on the sidewalk opposite our building. I looked away for what seemed seconds and looked back and he was gone. To this day, I believe Jesus visited me in this person.

Scenario 4:

Suellen's cousin, RD and his wife Gwen, who know more about Chicago's history and architecture than than most people in Chicago took us on a "spiritual spaces" tour with the Chicago Architecture Foundation. We visited the oldest Methodist church in Chicago, the First United Methodist Church at the Chicago Temple founded by Methodist circuit riders in 1831 – six years before the City of Chicago was incorporated. The church sits on top of a bank in a multi-story building, the first skyscraper in Chicago.

In the church's foyer, we saw two amazing works of art. One was the original painting of the most popular face of Jesus, the Anglicized picture sometimes called the "hippie Jesus."

The other was a sculpture of Jesus hanging on actual charred remnants of a cross that the Ku Klux Klan burned on the lawn of a southern family. On the cross, an African African man in bronze hung with severed arms and feet. If this was not telling enough, the lighting in the room cast shadows at various angles on the wall behind the cross.

How does one interpret a sculptural depiction of a handicapped African American Jesus on cross with shadows? One does not travel far in the U.S. today to see its significance. The news media reports how not so well we are dealing with the kinds of racism that prompted the burning of this cross. Recent highlights of Katrina's 10th anniversary have African Americans in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans still feeling ignored in reconstruction efforts. Police shootings in Ferguson and Staten Island (where I once served as pastor to NYPD families) are statements that there is work to

do. One need not go further than the Genesis 1:26-27 biblical injunction that all people are created in God's image and therefore have dignity and worth.

The scenarios end there. I trust that these stories inspire you to see Jesus in your everyday life and furthermore help us to make the world a better place. Amen.