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Redwoods Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 93 and Matthew 14:22-27
"Surfing, God, and Church"

I'm continuing my series of past sermons. Last week's sermon on God was spoken in my second month here. I looked at my sermons halfway through my eight years at Redwoods and came across this one. It communicates something close to my heart: Surfing and surfing's relationship to God and the church. It's my theology and ecclesiology of surfing. It was preached on September 9, 2012. Here it is, slightly revised:

When I arrived at Redwoods 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 new 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 have not 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 especially since I went surfing at Pacifica on Labor Day.

I have six lessons of surfing in relation to God and the church. The first and in a nutshell: Surfing is oneness of body, board and wave. Christianity is oneness of human beings, Jesus and God.

In order to be a good surfer, there needs to be unity between body, board and wave. The more you have oneness, the better you're surfing. When we have a wipeout – life involves wipeouts – we get disconnected from that unity, but your surfboard is there, close, and you reach out and pull the board back to you and get reconnected. Likewise, in life wipeouts, Jesus Christ is near. All we need to do is reach out to him, pull him close, and we too will be reconnected.

A note of clarification: We often hear the phrase body, mind and spirit. This is dualistic. For me body is spirit and mind is spirit. So when I say body, I mean spirit. If "body," is a human being as an expression of the Holy Spirit, the "surfboard" Jesus, and the "wave" God, we have the Trinity.

I love the communal dimension to God in the Trinity: God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are one and three in relation to each other. Thus, 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.

The second lesson is the joy and bliss of being in the water, enjoying the splash of waves and the environment. I've been in many amazing surfing environments. In the ocean, one is held by the silky palm of creation while pelicans, seagulls and other sea birds fly by. One experiences liquid reflections of sunrises and sunsets. There's an amazing array of occurrences that impress 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:

Verse 4: "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. I would never know praise of God 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 which is the synagogue for Jews and the church for Christians.

Verse 5: "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 an instrument of the trade; the better the instrument 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." Therefore, as members of the church we study Jesus, who he is and what he does, and live his example the best we can.

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 doesn't happen 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 gospel story makes the point that if one spends quality time with God one can go through stormy seas 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 (Remember when we did that? It was a great year of growing in our prayer lives. Travelers on the journey practiced in their own time and space and met once a month after worship with others on the journey. That was 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, all sports, etc. When we link faith with daily life or spirit with work we spend quality time with God – where all of life becomes quality time with God, which, in fact, is what life is all about. (Here again, we had an entire educational series on the spirituality of work).

Six and finally, my relationship to the ocean has become an important part of my unconscious. Maybe I'm drawn to the sea because of this. Your primary nature encounters could be mountains, lakes, forests, deserts, etc.

I am grateful that this dimension 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 (now 32 years). During that time I shared privately with him a disturbing dream.

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 shadows which are good to face and integrate for greater wholeness.

I once was chased by a wolf in a dream and when I hit a wall I awoke. The next day in meditation, I recalled the dream and was led to turn and face the wolf. I did so and it screeched to halt. I asked the wolf what it wanted. It was surprised that I had stopped and turned around and we spoke. In a short while, we hugged each other and moved on. I had faced and integrated my shadow, learned something (at least befriending my shadow) and moved on.

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 whole. 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 the sea for integration, peace and tranquility. Subsequently, I have served churches in coastal Florida, New York and California.

I also learned the importance of paying attention to my dreams in order to hear God's word to me and to live that word the best I could.

In conclusion, 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.”

I think this is a false dichotomy but a worthwhile conversation. 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. Suellen and I are the church and we attend worship and participate in church activities and that, in the words of poet Robert Frost, “...has made all the difference” in our lives and we are sure yours as well. Going to church and connecting with God in Christ and inspired by the Holy Spirit certainly makes the beach and surfing for me way more enjoyable and meaningful. Amen.