Sunday, March 25, 1973
WAYS OF EXPERIENCING THE TRANSCENDENT DIMENSION (No. 3 in a Series)
Acts 2:1-4,42-43

There is a transcendent dimension to life! It's a part of what we Christians know as God and in one way or another, all human beings want to be in touch in a conscious way with that dimension. We want to experience God. We want to know that we are connected with the source of creation. We want to feel God's power in our own lives.

In our particular time, there is an increase in interest in the spiritual, in the mystical, in all those things which are related to what we have been calling in this sermon series, "the transcendent dimension." People are again trying all kinds of ways and methods, some old and some new and some borrowed, in an attempt to experience a sense of depth in their lives and to achieve a kind of harmony and direction in their living.

Yoga, transcendental meditation, eastern mysticism, prayer groups, ways of altering consciousness, encounter groups--all are ways of trying to experience something "more," something which transcends our ordinary lives.

At the same time, the transcendent dimension shows up in all of our lives in some ordinary ways. They may be so much a part of our everyday lives that we have not thought of them as "signals of transcendence," as Peter Berger calls them.

One such "signal of transcendence" is our propensity for order, for structure in our living. Throughout human history, human beings have created some kind of ordered society and have felt the need to bring some kind of order into their own lives. Creation itself, as described in the book of Genesis in the Bible is an "ordering" function. God brings order of out chaos, divides the light from the darkness and bring creation into a dynamic form. Listen to the way the Biblical writer puts it — "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters."

We know from our own experience that when we are deprived of some kind of fundamental order, both group and individual are threatened with the most basic terror, the terror of chaos.

Our propensity for order is grounded in a faith or trust that ultimate reality is in order, is "all right," is as it should be, and that God is continuing to create, to order all of creation.

We human beings are also "ordering persons," and in a fundamental sense, every ordering gesture is a signal of transcendence. As an illustration, Peter Berger says, "consider the most fundamental ordering gesture of all-- the kind of assurance which a mother gives her anxious child. The child wakes up in the night, perhaps from a bad dream and finds himself surrounded by darkness, alone, beset by nameless threats. The child is very much afraid and cries out for his mother. It is hardly an exaggeration to say, that at this moment, the mother is being invoked as a high priestess of protective order.

It is she and in many cases she alone, who has the power to banish the chaos and fear and restore a sense of order in the child's life. And of course, any good mother will do just that. She will take the child and cradle him in her arms. She will turn on a lamp which will perhaps encircle the scene with a warm glow of reassuring light. She will speak or sing to the child, and

the content of this communication will invariably be the same — she is saying by her actions and behavior and perhaps her words — “Don’t be afraid, everything is in order, everything is all right.” If all goes well, the child will be reassured, his trust in reality recovered and, in this trust, he will return to sleep.

All of this of course belongs to the most routine experiences of life and does not depend upon any religious preconceptions. Yet this common scene raises a far from ordinary question which immediately introduces a religious dimension. Is the mother lying to the child? The answer in the most profound sense can be “no” only if there is some truth in the re-ligious interpretation of human existence — namely that there is a sense in which everything is going to be all right--that we can trust God, the source of creation.

In other words, this seemingly simple statement of the mother can be translated into a statement of cosmic scope-- “Have trust in being.” This is what the statement implies. Here is a belief in a transcendent order which is of such a character that we human beings can trust ourselves and our destiny to it. It’s a signal of transcendence.

And there are other signals of transcendence which are a part of our everyday life. Playfulness is one of them. In playing, one steps out of one time into another. The intention of play of course is joy. And when this intention is realized, we experience a little bit of eternity.

Another signal of transcendence is hope. Hope too is built into all of us and we experience it in our ordinary round of activities. Human existence is always oriented toward the future. We human beings best realize ourselves in pro- jects.

Now of course, the specific content of hope varies, but there is a religious undertone always present. Furthermore, human hope has always asserted itself most intensely in the face of experiences that seemed to spell utter defeat, most intensely of all in the face of the final defeat of death.

There is also a signal of transcendence to be found in humor. At its deepest level the comic reflects the imprisonment of the human spirit in the world. By making jokes and laughing at the imprisonment of the human spirit, humor implies that this imprisonment is not final, but will be overcome. Humor anticipates redemption. Humor also mocks the so-called serious business of this world and the mighty who carry it out. It reminds us of the Apostle Paul’s statement in 1st Corinthians — "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For the foolishness of God is wiser than men. God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the· wise.”

There is no doubt many other signals of transcendence to be found in ordinary everyday life — pointers to God which are always in the midst of us: ways in which we experience transcendence!

But there are also more direct ways of experiencing the transcendent God in our lives, particularly from the Christ-ian perspective. Let’s look at some of those. Each of the following ways are not complete in themselves, but all work together.

1. First of all, prayer of one kind or another is indispensable to an experience of the transcendent dimension. Last week in the sermon we made an attempt to describe prayer, what it is and some of the things it does. Today we are taking that next step and saying that prayer, regular disciplined prayer, and meditation in particular are crucial in any regular experience of the Transcendent and its power. The persons who have spiritual depth, those

whom we have often designated as “saints” in the history of our faith and indeed in other religions as well, have always been those persons who have had a systematic and disciplined devotional life of prayer and meditation.

Like all other good things, it must be cultivated and practiced. Just as one can’t learn to play the piano well in ten easy lessons with little practice, so we cannot experience depth in prayer automatically. Or theoretically a person may study to throw ringers in horseshoes; actually, to throw them he must practice for the peg. Many truths about prayer can be explored through theory but no learning will become personal experience and reality apart from doing.

1. The first rule we need to learn in prayer is relaxation. We cannot expect to come into the divine presence tense and terse and expect to meet the Divine. In this state of tension, we are still very much involved in ourselves. We have to let go. Such letting go is true of life as a whole. A report has it that a large sum of money was spent in teaching Ted Williams to relax at the batter’s plate. A golfer may shoot fairly well until he is obsessed to do better. Then he usually be- comes tense and does far worse. God has made the world self-defeating for the self-serious. Relaxation is needed in prayer as in everything else.

There are also some concrete aids to relaxation in prayer. One such aid is to literally take one’s whole self and place it in God’s hands, saying something like, “Holy Spirit, take me as I am and help me to pray. Here I put myself in your hands completely. Receive me completely, both my willing and my unwilling parts.”

There may also be certain physical positions which are more relaxing for you than others. Make yourself com-fortable and even work at relaxing yourself from your finger-tip and toes inward until your whole self is relaxed. Bodily relaxation is of utmost importance for effective prayer. One reason we have a period of silence is for reflection.

Along with relaxation comes recollection. The order here is not fixed. Genuineness and naturalness are most im-portant. Recollection involves first of all recalling who God is. God is sovereign love. He is both ultimate reality and our most intimate center. We should not pray as pagans, bowing and scraping or pleading to be heard. God is more real and nearer than we are and wants to be intimate with us far more than we want it with Him.

To be able to remember who God is, is perhaps the most difficult prerequisite of true prayer. We tend to treat God as though he were one of us. We endow him with our own love of glory, desire for revenge, or hardness of mind. We keep forgetting that if we but call on Him honestly, he hears and helps us more than we can ask or think.

Prayer is communion. At times it consists of passionate, compassionate, responsible, and thankful thinking and talking. But there are other times when deep silence is necessary. Happy lovers know the depth of wordless worship. Constant jabbering makes us weary. In the deepest moments of their lives, human beings are struck dumb and numb not only with sorrow but with deep joy.

Now in all of this we have been talking primarily about private prayer and meditation, and it is one of the ways of more directly experiencing the transcendent dimension.

2. A second and equally important way is through corporate worship--worship with others in a group. Private devotions are crucial, but they are no substitute for common worship. Even in

times of extreme persecution. Christians have felt the need to come together for worship although the risk was great.

The Christian Faith is a coffi111unal faith. Its history is that of a community of people all the way back into the eld Testament. One of the most powerful experiences of the transcendent recorded in the Bible is that contained in the book of Acts which took place on Pentecost, and it took place within a worshipping community of Christians. They had all come together in one place for worship and they experienced God's power as they had not known it before, As the book of Acts testifies, the early church con-tinued to meet together in groups for worship and prayer.

Jesus himself made a regular habit of participating in the worship at the local synagogue each Sabbath day. It has been the testimony of Christians throughout history that they have most often experienced the power and energy of God in community worship.

In fact, worship is the supreme and only indispensable activity of the Christian Church. Corporate or public worship such as we carry on here each Sunday morning is more than simple training, education, or a psychological exercise. Worship, along with prayer are fundamental ways in which God, the creative mystery, from whom we and all things derive our being, is most often experienced. This has been the testimony of Christians through the ages.

Now of course we may need to worship in various ways, and I do not suppose that a time will ever come when all Christ-ians will find a single uniform liturgy which will be ful-filling for all. There ought to be a rich diversity to take care of the wide range of human needs. But we do need corporate worship of one sort or another.

Paul Tillich wrote: "He who is not able to perceive some-thing ultimate, something infinitely significant is not a full human being." This may seem too sweeping and dogmatic a statement. but in it he is describing a rich and full concept of humanity in which he includes a dimension of experience which stretches us to a new stature while the secularists deny there is such a dimension and impose narrower limits on what it means to be fully human.

Worship can give us an experience of the transcendent, can draw us out of ourselves and be uplifting; and the fact is that we human beings cannot find a satisfying life without looking beyond the range of the finite and this-worldly. Worship, like prayer however, to be meaningful, needs regularity and discipline in our lives. It also means that when we are here in the service we are to participate and not just sit back and wait to be inspired.

3. A third way of experiencing the transcendent dimension in our lives is through other people. This is o. course related to worship as we have been describing it in company with other people, but it's also more than that.

We can experience God in one-to-one relationships. I'm sure that many of you here have experienced the transcendent dimension through the person and ministry of Tom Evans and his family. God most often works through persons and our personal relationships.

Not only are one to one relationships important, but continued growth in spiritual life requires a group. It goes back to our most imperative need — the need for relatedness, the need to love and be loved.

Jesus said, “Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I also.” God is often felt in our relationships with one another — particularly when we share a problem or joy with other persons, or when we meet someone in a crisis, or when we meet in small groups to discuss and share our faith and doubts as some of our members are doing during this Lenten season.

The rise of Christianity itself exemplifies the breaking through of the transcendent into the consciousness of a gathered and expectant group. Throughout the history of the church, every significant renewal of the church has been sparked by a return to small group life, prayer groups, Bible study groups, discussion groups, retreat groups.

This should not surprise us for a person often finds meaning in life as he comes into a relationship with other persons. God has made us for himself and for one another and we are restless until we find1 our rest in God and in one an- other. We experience such things as God’s love, God’s judgment, God’s forgiveness most often through the love, judgment, or forgiveness of other persons. We are talking about more than mere humanism here.

We are talking about the double-relatedness of human beings. We believe there is a power more than what rests in the center of human beings which at the same time pervades the whole of creation. It is the witness of our faith that this power can come into the world through the lives of men and women who seek it and open themselves to it and to other persons. This seeking and opening have always been more easily done when people band themselves together and give mutual assist-ance in their seeking and praying, and worship. Amen.

Discussion questions:

1. What are some of the ways you have experienced God in your day-to-day activities and relationships?

2. Discuss worship in First-Plymouth Church. What is helpful to you and what could be more helpful? What parts of the worship service have little meaning for you?

3. In your group, you might try taking a few minutes to totally relax, and then try prayer.

4. Continue to pray for each other in your group each day this coming week. Also pray for the church and for the staff as they try to carry on their ministry.