Sunday, August 23, 1987
ON FINDING GOD
Romans 11:33-36; Matthew 16:13-20

The news is full of stories of people searching for something more in their lives. They want to find something that assures them there is more to life than what the eye can see, the ear can hear, the mouth can taste, the hand can touch, or the nose can smell.

Not very long ago, thousands of people went to Memphis, Tennessee, to pay homage to their dead hero, Elvis Presley. These people were worshippers. Then, I read about a religious cult in Florida that plans to sacrifice animals as part of its worship. Last weekend was also supposed to be the time of the universal harmonic convergence — so again, people gathered in various places to meditate, to hum, and to wait.

In the newspaper on Thursday evening, there was a story about thousands of people who had traveled to a house in Mount Shasta, California, to see what they claimed was an image of an angel appearing on a woman's TV set. However, the police chief and a TV repairman said the image was caused by the TV set's bad capacitor and low-voltage power supply.

In the same paper, there was a story saying that actress Shirley Maclaine is planning to build a spiritualist center on 800 acres of land on the Baca Ranch in Colorado. Owners of the property say her center will join a broad spectrum of spiritual groups that have established communities on the 80,000-acre ranch near Crestone.

All these stories show that people are, in one way or another, looking for God, for the transcendent. We pastors come into personal contact every day with people who are looking for God.

A pastor in another city wrote about a man who came to see him, who was not a member of the church he served. His story went like this: "My wife came after me with a butcher knife. My son decked her. She tried to drown our nine-month-old baby. She kidnapped the two smallest children. I didn't know where they were for eight months. One day they appeared on my doorstep."

This man was asking for a blessing. He wanted to be able to see God in the horror of his life, so he came to the pastor. I suspect that people often seek out their pastors because of their need for God. They want the transcendent to put a stop to the runaway spiral of their lives. The man who came to see my friend knew that his life was off course. And he knew — unconsciously or consciously — that he needed something as powerful as God to get him back on track.

People seek out the church because of their need for God. There are things that happen to us and to other members of our family that haunt us for the rest of our lives. There are images of failure and despair that we cannot seem to shake by ourselves. A woman remembers and cannot forget that her older brother was killed by her father. He fell off the back of the car as his father was backing up. "Oh, Daddy," he said in his father's arms as he died. Her father never got over it. "He was broken down for two years," she said. "And then it stayed with him for the rest of his life."

She came to the church seeking God. The church is here to remind us that we are made in the image of God, which means, among other things, that God is a part of all of us and that, in the end, God wins. God won at Easter. God wins in our lives today when the images of light beat the images of darkness.

A young woman had an abortion. It was a tough time for her and her family. Hardly anyone else knew about it. But those who did kept close to her, so much so that her mother said, “This place is oozing with love.” It is love that enables us to move from the images of darkness into the images of light.

How could we possibly be loved when we have run over our own child or killed an unborn infant? Such love doesn’t make sense, but it is the good news of the Christian faith that we are loved by God even when we don’t deserve it. This love of God, as seen in Jesus, caused St. Paul to write: “Oh, the depth of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God’s judgments and how inscrutable God’s ways.”

But aren’t there other places besides churches where people are loved in spite of what they have done? Of course — families, workplaces, neighborhoods. The difference is that love is the church’s job. It’s why we are here. It’s to be the place where we practice grace. Furthermore, the church reminds us that we are not left to our own devices. It is God loving through us that enables us to love.

A young woman in senior high school knocked on the minister’s door. She was carrying flowers. They were for the mother of one of her classmates. The classmate had taken her own life.

The young woman had come to see the minister because she needed strength to go to the girl’s mother. She had never done anything like this before, and she had no idea how she would be received. But she was going. She felt she had to go. She wanted to go.

She said to the minister, “If only the youth group could have been there for her friend. Maybe we could’ve helped.” But her friend had not been part of any church. She had no place to turn. She had no people of her own age to love her unconditionally, the same way they felt God was loving them. Maybe that was the key to what went wrong. Throughout all her failures, throughout her inability to “measure up” and “get good grades” and be “the perfect daughter,” there was no one, anywhere in her life, who loved her unconditionally — who became the channel of God’s love to her.

The church is where we are loved unconditionally. We love because God loves us. How do we know that? Because Jesus came and lived among us, and died, and rose again. In Jesus, we see the fullest expression of God’s love. That love of God is available to all of us. It is what enables us to love others unconditionally. It is a never-ending source of love. When you experience that kind of love, you have experienced and found God. And the more you give that kind of unconditional love, the more you receive it. Amen.