

LET THERE BE STRESS!

Date: Sept. 16, 2007

Text: Luke 10: 25-36; Luke 14:25-33

Here is a question for you. Is stress in your life necessarily bad? I imagine that your immediate response would be "It sure is!" but I hope to show you that there is another side to the matter. It's a pertinent topic because there may be a certain degree of anxiety within the congregation right now as you enter another time of transition. My departure and the arrival of a new pastor are bound to create some uncertainty. As Kay Fetterly was telling the children last week, nobody likes change. Thus, when the sermon title declares, "Let there be stress!" as a congregation and as individuals thinking of our hectic lives we all may be tempted to join in saying, "No way!"

Let me first assure you that the situation at First Presbyterian presently is nothing like what was encountered when your long time pastor left or during the interim or in the time of the last installed pastor. This congregation is in a much different place now and I sincerely believe you are ready and anxious to move forward.

But let me get back to the point raised by Jesus' comments in Luke 14 and this matter of whether stress is good or bad. You can't pick up a magazine without reading something about handling the pressures of life. Luke, however, points up a problem in all this talk about eliminating stress. Is life without pressure a goal for Christians? If we say yes, then, Jesus' comments about setting aside all other loyalties really become a challenge. In studying Jesus' words, we need to be aware that in the Semitic cultures of the Near East, it was quite common in speech to use exaggeration as a means of re-enforcing one's point. Thus, when Jesus said that his followers are to "hate" their parents, it is not to be taken literally but only to jolt us into realizing that nothing can come before our allegiance to God, not even that which is most precious to us. Sometimes, as we well know, families, jobs, personal interests, are used as excuses for not giving 100% of our loyalty to the Almighty. Jesus' intent in this passage was simply to re-emphasize the first commandment: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

People flocked around our Lord but he knew that when the chips were down, few would be there. In our day, it is the same. There are Christians and there are Christians! Clearly, with all that he said, Jesus had in mind a very serious commitment that involves all of one's life. That's why Jesus urged his disciples to count the cost like a builder deciding whether to build a new subdivision because he knew you are bound to have stress if you make this commitment to follow Jesus in the way you live each day. The six o'clock news reports that there were more killing in Iraq and you worry because of the loss of lives on both sides. The boss tells you to get rid of someone because of inferior work and you toss and turn all night because you know the individual has a family. But is such tossing and turning bad? If I understand Jesus' teaching, such restlessness with the ethical complexities of our day may be exactly what Christianity is supposed to be about.

Do you begin to see why I said that there is another side to this matter of stress in life? It seems that almost all that our Lord had to say was counter-culture and you need to catch that strain if nothing else out of this sermon. Culture calls us to find ways to escape, to avoid stress, to be comfortable; Jesus calls us to serve humanity and bring in God's kingdom and that may be very stressful. One of my favorite quotes comes from a play about the life of Henry David Thoreau. He is in jail protesting our country's treatment of Mexico. Ralph Waldo Emerson visits him and declares, "Henry David, what are you doing in there?" to which Thoreau replies, "Waldo, what are you doing out there?"

Some forms of stress do need to be put aside but when it comes to living as Christ's people daily there is bound to be stress because the world is not always the kind of place God wants it to be. For instance, there is growing concern regarding what kind of example we are setting for our children in terms of dealing with life's issues. A group of psychologists met recently in Los Angeles and the headline reporting the meeting said:

"Some psychologists worry that we don't worry enough". It went on to say: "drugs, drink, and the single-minded pursuit of career or money have become major means for many Americans attempting to insulate themselves from the world at large. And, some conclude, rampant concern for self is ripping up the social fabric of our nation, tearing hardest at minorities and the poor."

As I have said before, the gauge for our Christianity is not the golden rule but the great commandment read this morning. We are to show our love of God by loving others. The story of the Good Samaritan that comes immediately after the great commandment in Jesus' teaching makes it clear that loving others does not stop at the boundary of our property! And think of the stress in his life when as a hated foreigner he tried to help the beaten man!

What both of our readings are about commitment and the meaning of discipleship. Someone has said that when Jesus told the disciples that he was going to die on a cross and they responded, "Oh Lord, that can't happen to you", what they really were meant was "don't let that happen to me". Very clearly, Christianity is meant to be a religion of service, of giving out of love as God has given to us. To follow Christ means more than going to worship, making out a pledge and being relatively nice to people around us as good as that may be. We need to ask ourselves, even as we are doing quite a bit, is there more that Christ wants us to be about? A South African pastor once put it this way.

We will go before God to be judged and God will ask us: "Where are your wounds?"
And we will say, "We have no wounds" and God will ask, "Was there nothing worth fighting for?"

Think of the opportunity we all have been given – the ability to decide how to use our time and money in addition to providing for the necessities of life. What a privilege! God must be rubbing his hands together in anticipation of what all those Boomers who are going to retire in the next 10 or 15 years will do in His name. Those who spend winters in Florida may have a chance to help people who still suffer the devastating impact of hurricanes. I met an early retiree in Spanish language school in Cuernavaca, Mexico one year who was preparing himself to help in a hospital in El Paso where knowing Spanish was so important. A retired Kodak employee, Bill Davis, with a few others has restored our interest in God's gift of the Genesee River gorge. If you have children, why not spend a Saturday helping at Habitat for Humanity? Then you have a real family learning experience.

A balanced approach to life in which God becomes the foundation is what is called for. Personal health is important so having time to jog is good; family togetherness is a precious commodity so use it wisely; in addition, a full life focused on God's love includes a wider circle of concern. Wholeness comes as all 3, personal, family and world are kept in balance but always there has to be a cutting edge to our faithfulness, a willingness to stretch ourselves spiritually and morally. Any psychologist or business manager will tell you a certain degree of stress is the creative, growing edge of existence and the same is true for faith commitment.

I am keenly aware that someone might say to me, "Don't you often preach on putting worry aside?" That's right and hopefully there is truth in both types of sermons. Instead of trying to avoid all stress this week, struggle with what needs to be put aside and what issues need to be confronted. Find time for prayer and mediation to seek God's guidance. Then apply Jesus' statement to your personal habits: "whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple". And know that God will be with you in this balancing act, which is called discipleship.