

"True Colors"

Sandy Reimer

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READINGS

from Psalm 92: 12-15 *as translated by Stephen Mitchell* - And the wise grow like the cedars of Lebanon. They are planted in the dark soil of God, and their leaves keep turning to God's light. Even in old age, they bear fruit; they are strong: living proof of God's righteousness, God's rocklike steadfastness, sealed and without a crack.

from the Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 20A - Let a person always bend like a reed and not be hard like a cedar. A reed grows in water; its stem is flexible and its roots are many. All the winds in the world cannot uproot it, for it sways back and forth with the winds. And when the winds cease to blow, the reed is still standing in its place. A cedar does not grow in water; its trunk is not flexible and its roots are few. But when a southerly wind blows, it is immediately uprooted.

Resonating Song - "True Colors" - Salina Briseno Kiker, David Evans, Alan Hill, Jack Nettles and Ned Stewart

Sermon - Thank you so much Salina, David, Alan, Jack and Ned. I've always loved the song "True Colors." It was written by Billy Steinberg and Tom Kelly, professional songwriters. Billy originally wrote the song about his own mother, which is a sweet way to think of the song. Tom altered the first verse a bit, and they submitted the song to Cyndi Lauper, who used it as the title track for her second album. It's a song that can be sung to anyone you love; it's a song that I believe any mentor could sing; it's a song that if I personify God, I could imagine God singing to me, celebrating who I am, my true colors as beautiful as a rainbow. And it fits so well with our worship theme! This song was the first thing that popped into my mind when I had to come up with a sermon title in time for the May newsletter deadline. I figured the sermon would come to me as I went along. And it has.

I want to talk about faith this morning – about two characteristics of faith that are two pillars, perhaps two ends of the rainbow of colors that represents who we are and what we believe.

One side of faith is what the psalmist describes as being like the cedars of Lebanon. They are large stately evergreens that grow to be 40 to 50 feet tall with massive trunks. In the Psalmists' time, those cedars of Lebanon were prized above all other trees, for their wood was straight and strong and durable. In faith, to be like the cedars of Lebanon is to stand tall, to be clear about one's beliefs, to know what one is about, and to display one's true colors for all, easy to see, even from a distance. This side of faith is like being planted in the dark soil of God, planted in place with rocklike steadfastness, as the Psalmist says, sealed and without a crack. Think of your life; think of a time when what you believed, what you knew, was so certain that you were like one of those cedars of Lebanon.

Growing up when I did, the phrase "show your true colors" meant movies like "True Grit" and "High Noon," meant heroes like John Wayne and Gary Cooper – or more

recently Mel Gibson in "Braveheart" or Russell Crow in "Gladiator" – or now Christian Bale in "Superman." These are cowboy and super hero images where to show your true colors is to step up, stand tall and fast and fight it out. It is the stance of the true believer. It is the stance of someone like Martin Luther who challenged the entire Catholic church when he nailed his ninety-five theses of what he believed to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany and said, "Here I stand. I can do no other." It is the faith of the person who is certain, who is willing and ready to act, to go for broke. It is, I believe, the dominant image in our culture of what it means to be strong, the kind of strength that is easy to see. Sometimes it works. But sometimes it doesn't – and the hero gets killed, the certainty gets shattered, the stock market crashes, the dogma doesn't bend, the water rises and the wind blows, and the cedar tree is uprooted. Think of a time in your life, in your faith, when that happened to you.

Yet faith is never just one thing; it is always a dialogue between two competing truths. For if one end of faith is strong beliefs and certainty, then the other end of the rainbow of faith is an openness and uncertainty. So I love this reading from the Talmud, from the rabbinic stories that are part of Judaism's parallel oral tradition. "Let a person always bend like a reed and not be hard like a cedar. A reed grows in water; its stem is flexible and its roots are many. All the winds in the world cannot uproot it, for it sways back and forth with the winds. And when the winds cease to blow, the reed is still standing in its place."

I am reminded of that day in September of 2004 when I sat for hours on my back porch, with no electricity, during Hurricane Frances, watching the winds blow, watching some trees break and fall while others, especially those tall flexible pine trees, just swayed to and fro with each gust, almost touching ground it seemed, and yet surviving to stand tall and strong again when the winds were gone.

I believe that we live today in times that call us to take this story of the reeds seriously. We live in dramatically changing times that require not only being rooted in our faith but also require us to be open and flexible. Just remember for a moment the way the world was one year ago today ... and all that has changed in the course of this year: the economy, cutbacks in funding and jobs, the political scene, the national government, the steady progression and growing awareness of global warming. Even Twitter and tweet meant very different things last May, at least to me. Some of the fixtures of security and certainty that we all had relied on for years, like those tall cedars, have been uprooted. Now we are all looking for those places in our lives where our roots are many, where we can bend and find flexibility, swaying with the wind, and still standing in the midst of all the changes.

In this vein, there are two people in the news who've caught my attention, people who it seems to me are like reeds, with many roots in their lives and are able to sway in the wind and not break. You already know about these two people. The first is Captain Chesley Sullenberger, the pilot of US Airways Flight 1549 who landed his plane in the Hudson River after both engines lost power. Drawing upon his roots, his years of experience in flying, he was able to maneuver flexibly through an unexpected series of dangerous events to a water landing he had never done before; and then he walked the plane twice as it was slowly sinking to make sure no one had been left on board.

No dramatic John Wayne stand-off moments, just a man doing his work, yet adjusting instantly to an unforeseen and changing situation, a man who survived himself along with every passenger on that plane.

And I think of Elizabeth Edwards, a woman who is fighting metastatic cancer, a woman who was, so publicly and graphically, humiliated by her husband's affair and his lies to her during his campaign for the Presidency. Yet somehow in the midst of all of this pain and change, the winds have not toppled her spirit or her integrity. Like a reed, she sways back and forth and she is still standing. Make no mistake, my friends, Elizabeth Edwards is not Tammy Wynette, just singing choruses of "Stand By Your Man." When I read excerpts from Elizabeth Edwards' new book, appropriately titled Resilience, I was touched by her honesty, her ability to reflect poignantly and openly about these storms in her life. She says, "Just as I don't want cancer to take over my life, so I don't want this indiscretion to take over my life either. But I need to deal with both; and then I need to find peace with both. I am not going to suggest that the process is over. It is long from being over. I am still adjusting my sails to the new wind that has blown through my life." As Elizabeth Edwards faces death and the shambles of her marriage and assesses how to make sense out of what is left for her life, she goes on to say, "Nothing will ever be quite as I want it, but sometimes we eat the toast that is burned on one side anyway, don't we?"

I led a workshop with Larry on Retreat called "What Really Matters," which I will repeat as a Sum-min-ar here the first Sunday in June. We reflected on the Biblical parable of the sower and all the seeds we sow in our lives, some that wither, some that produce a bit, some that produce a lot. For most of us, the amazing discovery was that the seeds that had withered and died were directly related to and often responsible for the new seeds that flourished; it was often the burned toast that led us to what became most important. What mattered was our faith in the whole process of life, our faith in and beyond ourselves, our faith that allowed us to bend and change and regroup.

We are at an amazing place in the life of the United Church of Gainesville. We are called this year to set off on a new chapter of our journey, a journey that will depend on our strength as a spiritual community, on the grounding we have in our Compact that binds us to one another, and on our ability to bend and sway with the changes and the winds that will come our way in the course of these next years. We are intentionally, step by step, walking together through a time of transition, holding on and also letting go. We need to be a congregation of reeds; we need to cherish this church and one another; we need to be willing to sway, even to make mistakes and then regroup; to honor who we are and to embrace a future that is less known.

The Search Committee has been the advance guard, walking this journey for the past nine months. I think that in many ways we began, each of us on the committee, as one of the cedars of Lebanon, perhaps even as the cedars of UCG. We each knew what we thought and what we wanted. And then, as we worked together, we learned to hunker down, like reeds swaying in the winds, to listen to one another, to be open to what was new and unpredictable and challenging, and to embrace that multitude of

important roots we all had in faith, faith that we expressed and knew in ways as diverse as we ourselves were.

And I too am personally on this journey, with the comfort of what is familiar and strong in me and with the challenge of what is unknown, of places where I will certainly be called to bend and to sway to new winds of change. So I offer for my own sake, and for yours, this poem by Jeanne Lohmann entitled "Praise What Comes."

surprising as unplanned kisses, all you haven't deserved
of days and solitude, your body's immoderate good health
that lets you work in many kinds of weather. Praise.

talk with just about anyone and quiet intervals, books,
your food and your hunger, nightfall and walks
before sleep. Praising these for practice, perhaps

you will come to at last praise grief and the wrongs
you never intended. At the end there may be no answers
and only a few very simple questions: did I love,

finish my task in the world? Learn at least one
of the many names of God? At the intersections,
the boundaries where one life began and another

ended, the jumping-off places between fear and
possibility, at the ragged edges of pain,
did I catch the smallest glimpse of the holy?

I leave you today with this call to faith, at one end of the rainbow the strength of the cedars of Lebanon and at the other end of the rainbow, the flexibility of the reeds. As we set out to shepherd this church and this congregation and this staff into this new transitional chapter of its life and of our lives: may we love, may we do our tasks, may we learn at least one of the many names of God, may we catch even the smallest glimpse of the holy in one another and in the Divine Mystery whom we know in many ways and may we see our true colors shining through it all.

Let us join in prayer:

Faith, we have been told, is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. And so, O Holy One, we pray this morning for faith: the faith that is our belief and conviction in what we know and hold dear and the faith that is what we hope for, our questions and longings, all that is unseen and unknowable.

Increase our kindness to one another; let us be people who care and who take care of one another. Open us continually to Your Spirit, that we may hold on to what is essential and that we may bend with flexible grace in the winds of change.

Bind us together in all our many colors, in all the ways we know Your Spirit, in all the names we use for Your creative presence, in all the days and years that lie ahead. Amen. Blessed be.