

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House
September 23, 2012
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Readings: Psalm 1; Mark 9:30-37

On the eve of Yom Kippur...

One to two million tons of debris. That is the amount of debris that remains churning in the Pacific Ocean following the tsunami that hit Japan nearly 16 months ago. As recently as this week, the fifth piece of debris, a four by four foot plastic floating bin from one of the power plants arrived on the shore of Oahu. The rest is heading toward the shores of California, Oregon, Washington, Canada, Alaska, and elsewhere.

The good news is that only 1 to 5 percent of it all will ever reach our shores – the not so good news is that that will still account for up to 10,000 tons of debris.

Twenty or so billion pounds.

Try stopping that. Try stopping the massive destruction of any tsunami hitting a populated area. Think about just how powerless we are to so that. Natural disasters are only disasters to we humans and our possessions. To nature, well, they are just natural events – such as a gentle rainfall. For Nature, well – it's all part of her *nature*.

Still, we humans do try to prepare for such events, we do all we can to protect ourselves and possessions with state of the art prediction and warning systems and models, programs, and advances in everything from architecture to evacuation techniques. We not only seek to prepare for the future – but to predict when the future preparations will be needed ---

All so we can survive. Or, control our survival. Which is sort of like controlling nature. A bit of insanity, some might say.

It's not unlike the "soft" insanity we engage to distort the deeper reality of the loss of human life, the names and lives of those lost and those who care about them – by shifting the conversation to plastic bins and the debris of the tsunami – away from the people and the pain. We don't like pain. It has become – as it always becomes what we do to try and distance ourselves from the reality of our humanity and mortality – a "numbers thing": this many lives lost, this many plants destroyed; this amount of radiation let loose into the air; this amount of "debris" heading toward our shores. Numbers and distance.

Out of mind and sight. These are now events, out of the headlines, and about people and places, cultures and continents different and at a distance from ours. It might as well be another world, at times.

Some of the writing for this morning's comments took place in a bit of another world, in the Apple Store in NYC, in the early morning community of the faithful, a 24 hour bazaar of techies, tech users, and tech wonderers. I did have a reason to be there, although I do admit that I sometimes go there for no reason, at all.

This time, I needed to get some functions on my phone updated and it was taking a while for everything to download. So I had an hour or so to wait and decided to do a little writing for this morning's comments. It may seem strange to think about an Apple Store as being a place to write. Actually, aside from the hundreds of people floating about and the music that is just loud enough to be heard but not cover the sounds of voices, and the tables with no chairs – but hundreds of computers available for use, aside from all this and more – the energy and excitement can make it a fascinating place from which to write.

There were hundred of people milling about, in anticipation of something – an answer to a question? a revelation of how to use something? a discovery that would make lives more predictable and ultimately protected?

The words you hear most often strung together are: “Will it do this?” “*Can* it do this?” “*Will I* be able to do this?”

Will I be able to live forever?!

If such a thing is possible, surely it is in this place, amidst the blue-shirted Apple Geniuses and staff who are all around, each as different as the people who came to shop or wander. Glistening, gleaming steel and chrome highlighted designs, centering around a staircase that itself “centers up” from the selling floor to the world above on 5th Avenue.

Is it heaven below the surface and hell above – or is it the other way around.

Is it Dante's Inferno, the Hotel California, Utopia – or just another store. No, really, it's not just another store. ☺

And there is a calmness in the place, almost like the eerie calm that follows a storm – without the debris. No one is standing in shock in the Apple store, surprise, possibility, potential – yes; shock, destruction, debris - no.

But the absorption, the intensity, the “connection” is unmistakable and of the same root. Whether on the shore watching one's live go out to sea only to become debris on another shore ---

Or whether leaning over the vista of gleaming technology and power about to be placed in your hand –

Both stir the human longing to find answers to questions such as of “Why?” “When?” “How?”

The problem with the longing, seeking answers to the longing – is that the answers are not externally based on a hard drive, operating system, or database. They are intrinsic questions about us, not what we can manipulate. Those are there, too, but these are the deeper ones. These are the questions internally woven into our DNA – these are the questions demanded by the Love that created us all and insists that Love be heard. Insists that God and Love be heard in our lives to know who we are and what we are called to do. It's the connection. Not the Internet.

As I looked around the store, And, in this diverse place I ask myself the question...

So, pastor, what are you supposed to do? "What am I supposed to do here, below what may be heaven or hell or above what might be heaven or hell, on either surface -- what am I supposed to do to let everyone know how miniscule and unimportant the shifts in tectonic plates or operating systems are compared to God's love and presence in our lives and the hopefulness and importance of serving one another to really know who you are and what your relationship with God calls you to do?

And the next question is one that refers to the inherent hubris in such a question: Who am I to think that any of these people need me -- or who am I to think that I know what any of these people need in their lives -- when there are times when I am not even sure what I need in mine?

There are times when I really do admire the courage of the street preachers. You know the ones. On the soap box, standing up in subways, calling people to God to repent. I wonder, "Am I supposed to do something like that here?"

"Ladies and gentlemen, Apple and tech lovers one and all, may I have your attention please..."

Then I shake my head.

Isn't all of this in some way arrogant? To think that somehow I know what others need? Isn't a little out of sorts to think that I (or any of us) can be first in leading others to heaven, fullness, completion, satisfaction, riches, --

Isn't it sort of like being among the disciples in this morning's readings, arguing about who will be first because they were the best of the disciples? Who will be #1?

It seems the desire for being number one in the first century already had its roots before we though we created the ad campaign or Sinatra sang the phrase...

And isn't the message, the simple, humble, "unself" elevating command, the secret of living a faithful life as it always has been, as Jesus responded to the disciples jockeying for position:

If you wish to be first, you must be last. For it is in service to others, caring for other's needs that the true heart and faithfulness are achieved. Be like the children, welcome them in my name (in words or in the quietness and actions of your heart) and you welcome the one who sent me. Welcome them and you welcome God. This is the message, the way, the path...

No matter what, love others; serve others. Even when the best you can do is to refrain from saying anything, letting go, forgiving from a distance...or being unsure of what to do. Love. Serve. Be still. And know God is.

So much of the confusion stems from the past; after what I have done how can it really be different; how can I be right with Go; maybe it's just easier to speed up my wireless download speeds and hope for the best...

All kidding aside. What am I supposed to do? How do I get over the mistakes I've made, the times I've come up short, not taken the actions I've needed to help others or myself, been confused about when love and tough love are or aren't, used the words I wished I hadn't or kept silent the words I wished I had spoken...weren't said.

On this eve of Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the year for our Jewish sisters and brothers, the day on which Jews see themselves as closest to God and the quintessence of their own souls. Let us do the same.

Let us also pray the prayer of Yom Kippur asking for forgiveness and purification, being cleansed of our sins – those things that distance us from God.

Let us be like little children, washed of all we never needed to know or carry, and somehow let us be content with acceptance – acceptance of our limitations and the unlimited presence of God's love in our lives.

Let us have no need to orchestrate events, but remember who the great conductor is and follow; listen as directed from the ancient and opening prayer of the Torah - Shema Ysrael

Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One

And as instructed by Jesus when questioned about what was the most important commandment of all:

To love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might and to love one another as you love yourselves.

And in so doing, in so remembering, we will know the one who has sent us all...and there's a good chance that heaven or hell, tsunami or technology will not dissuade us from loving and serving one another – and for that being enough. Really enough.

Welcoming the teachings of Jesus, being childlike, and, in so doing, welcoming the One who created us all. Could it really be that simple? Could it be? Could it?

You say...