

**Sunday, June 23, 2013**  
**Rev. Diane Monti-Catania**

**Sermon – “Think on These Things”**

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Since Easter I have been reflecting on our Christian values and how they might inform our lives.

This past week I had an opportunity to attend a lecture at Yale Divinity School by Professor Miroslav Volf on the topic of “God and Human Flourishing.”

Professor Volf touched on many of the issues that we have explored these past few months –

what is truth?;

who is our neighbor?;

what makes life worth living?

Who is God?

He started his presentation with a summary of Socrates’ dialogues regarding human desires and our ability to regulate those desires.

Socrates described those people who could not control their desires as “leaky vessels.”

“No matter what you pour in – they will never be full.”

He characterized *hell* as a place where these people pour water from one colander into another – never attaining the goal of fullness, completeness, or wholeness.

Professor Volf emphasized that our society has moved away from the human instinct to seek transcendence – something greater than us.

Universities and churches used to be the places that provided a forum for such conversations, but both have succumbed to a ‘consumer preference’ model, which closes off interior insights, as well as communal exploration. He said,

“Consumer promises close you off from deeper searches and diverts attention from God and transcendence and directs it onto the “flat plain of ordinary life.”

“The flat plain of ordinary life.”

A life without truth, goodness and beauty.

A life that is satisfied with the fulfillment of basic human needs, never reaching beyond what is needed in the moment.

He lamented the loss of community – replaced by an individualized focus on what is right for me – or perhaps my family – but nothing beyond.

A life worth living, he emphasized, is defined and lived out in community.

We cannot simply succumb to our own desires, without regard for our neighbor.

“Submission to something larger, *to God*, is not subtraction of our humanity but fulfillment.”

A report published this week by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, entitled “The Heart of the Matter” sounded an alarm drawing attention to society’s drift away from the study of humanities, focusing on success in the arts and sciences.

We have abandoned the search for truth, beauty and goodness replacing it with a quest for information and skills that will earn financial rewards in the marketplace.

In abandoning our quest for transcendence, we are neglecting the part of ourselves that nourishes our soul.

When we fail to study poetry and art and music and religion, we find ourselves on Professor Volf’s “flat plain of ordinary life.”

In Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi he encourages his followers to seek the peace of God which surpasses all understanding.

He gives them clear instructions on how to attain this peace: Rejoice in the Lord; Let your gentleness be known, don’t worry, pray, and think about those things that are true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent – anything worthy of praise.

I could just stop here and simply say – do what Paul says and you will find God.

But it is not always so easy so let’s spend some time thinking about how you can reframe your life so that it is one worth living.

I think one of the greatest challenges of living this way is that there is not much support for it in our society.

There is a fear that if you are too nice, or gentle or calm, that you will be taken advantage of.

I remember in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s when women were taking assertiveness training classes.

All of a sudden, a person who had been well mannered and perhaps a bit quiet, would raise their voice and be in your face.

Today, I see many people who manifest their vulnerability or insecurity by assuming a defensive attitude about almost everything.

These folks are always certain that something is wrong.

For them, evil lurks around every corner.

Their lives are void of gentleness, kindness, things that are honorable, just and pure.

I think the key to happiness and peace and perhaps transcendence lies in the focus of our attention.

Professor Volf's exhortations combined with Paul's lead us to a place where we focus less on ourselves and more on the other.

When we fill ourselves with God's love, with the gifts of God's Holy Spirit, we become vessels of kindness and goodness.

We overflow with an abundance of blessings that we are able to share without concern for depleting our resources – because there is always more.

This message is reiterated in our Old Testament reading today. In response to God's question "What are you doing here Elijah?" the prophet gives God an accounting of how wonderful he is – what a good person. God responds with a directive – OK you are great – now go do something for me.

This reminds me of people who say they are "spiritual but not religious." That translates into "I have a relationship with God that I keep to myself – I don't want to share my goodness with anyone."

I recently finished reading "The Reason for God" by Timothy Keller.

He quotes Soren Kierkegaard in asserting "that human beings were made not only to believe in God in some general way, but to love God supremely, center their lives on God above anything else, and build their very identities on God."

Anything other than this he characterizes as sin.

Sin is not just doing bad things, but the making of good things into ultimate things.

Anything that we worship – including ourselves, our children, our jobs, our material possessions – anything other than God, diminishes us as human beings.

So what are we to do?

We must develop a longing for God.

Our psalmist this morning said "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God."

Does this define you?

Are you yearning for God, for a relationship with your Creator?

Do you find truth, beauty and goodness in each day? Are you looking for it?

Henri Nouwen said,

The way God's Spirit manifests itself most convincingly is through its fruits: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control."

It is so clear.

We just have to make the commitment to do it.

The first step is a gentle turning-away from focusing on your own basic needs and opening your heart to a broader picture.

This will inevitably lead you to consider someone else's needs.

So often, when we look at things from our own perspective, we completely miss the opportunity to pour love from our vessel into the empty or leaky vessel of someone else.

So much of our restlessness or irritation with other people comes from a lack of understanding what they might be going through.

We are so busy trying to get our own needs met that we don't see anyone else.

At the conference on Tuesday one woman told a story about being on a mission trip in rural Mexico with her church from Southern California.

She said that her pastor asked the Mexican pastor, "How can you find God amidst so much poverty?"

The Mexican pastor replied, "I was just wondering how you can find God among so much abundance."

We have spent the past two months reflecting on our Christian values and how they impact our lives.

I encourage you to continue this journey.

Ask yourself the question:

*"Is God serving you or are you serving God?"*

When you are able to embrace the teachings of Jesus Christ regarding love of God and neighbor;

When you are able to find truth, beauty and goodness in each day;

when you are able to desire the common good beyond your own needs;

when you can follow Paul's advice and *Rejoice in the Lord always* –

you will find a transcendence that will take you beyond the “flat plain of ordinary life” to a life with God, a peace that surpasses all understanding.

You will be full. You will be whole. You will feel blessed.