

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15

June 18, 2006
Rev. Robin Long Sanderson

- 1 It is good to praise the LORD
and make music to your name, O Most High,
2 to proclaim your love in the morning
and your faithfulness at night,
3 to the music of the ten-stringed lyre
and the melody of the harp.
4 For you make me glad by your deeds, O LORD;
I sing for joy at the works of your hands.
12 The righteous will flourish like a palm tree,
they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon;
13 planted in the house of the LORD,
they will flourish in the courts of our God.
14 They will still bear fruit in old age,
they will stay fresh and green,
15 proclaiming, "The LORD is upright;
he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him."

One, never have inappropriate sexual relations with a parishioner and remember that any sexual relations with a parishioner are inappropriate. Two, never mix personal and church finances. In other words, don't "borrow" from the offering plate. And three, never, ever cry in church. These were the three most often repeated pieces of advice we received in seminary. And I took them to heart. Number one, never have an affair with a parishioner. No problem. I am way too busy and preoccupied to even consider having an affair, let alone actually following through on the plan. I don't have the energy for that kind of a logistical nightmare. And besides, I love Corey. (Perhaps those should have been in reverse order . . .) Number two, never "borrow" from the plate. I am not apt to mix personal and church finances even if I wanted to because I cannot for the life of me figure out how to unlock the church safe. I have the combination and everything, but is it to left all the way around, half way back to the right and then back again . . . I just can't be bothered to figure it out. And number three, well, number three is a bit harder for me, that bit about not crying in church. And yet it's the one admonition I've heard the most from professors and colleagues—whatever you do, never, ever cry in church. And I understand why they say it. The minister is the facilitator of worship. It's our job to make sure that all runs smoothly so that each of you can have a worshipful and meaningful experience while you're here. Having someone in your pulpit who appears to be always on the verge of crying is distracting—you sit there wondering, "Well, is she going to lose it again this Sunday?" and so the message is lost on you. I understand why they all tell us not to cry.

But I confess that occasionally it can be hard not to cry in church. Church is where we're often at our most vulnerable. It's where we actually take a moment to stop and think instead of rushing from one thing to the next. It's where music moves us, scriptures inspire us, and the love we feel from God and each other comfort us. It's a place where many of us let our guard down and so is it any wonder that a lot of folks cry in church? I used to do it all the time—mainly during hymns. But now I live with the voices of those professors and mentors in my head telling me not to cry, to never let you see me cry.

But last week, one of you caught me crying during church, during one of the hymns. And you sought me out later to find out if I was okay. And I was, and I am. Except for one thing. Except for this stole, this gently used, not-really-my-style-of-stole, green, shiny, fringed stole. A stole is representative of a yoke. When a new minister is ordained, he or she can then for the first time don a stole to symbolize carrying the yoke of Christ. It's an outward and visible sign of our inward calling to be members of the clergy. It doesn't set us above, it's just meant to set us apart. According to those former professors, a stole could be thought of as an indicator of who and who isn't allowed to be crying in church.

And so it's ironic that I was crying in church because of this stole. It used to belong the Rev. Gary Hodges. He was the minister of the church in which I grew up. He led me in Bible school songs, he held me up when he grabbed my hand and escorted me around the rink at a church roller skating party, he confirmed me, he was the first person I talked with about becoming a minister, and he laid his hand upon my head and said the prayer of ordination that made it all official when I was ordained. He was a mentor and guide, and later a colleague and friend. He was a larger than life character with an easy smile who, when he was talking to you, could make you feel like you were the most important person in the world. I used to think I was special to Gary. But last summer, upon his unexpected death from a blood clot that took him way too soon, I learned that lots of people thought they were special to Gary. And I truly believe that each of us was special to him. And part of the reason I was crying last week during church when I wore Gary's stole that his widow recently mailed to me for the first time is that Gary was so special to me. And the problem with that is, I never told him. I can't tell you how many times I thought to myself, "I haven't talked with Gary for a while. I should give him a call." But I never did. I never told him how often I thought of him or how much I admired him. I never let him know that so much of what is good about me is because of him. Jesus talked about planting a mustard seed—a most little-bitty seed—that, when nurtured in good soil, grows into a great, strong bush able to provide shelter and safety to others. Because of Gary's deep and passionate faith, this little seedling got sown in deep, rich soil and I am firmly planted in the soils of God's love.

One of the stories I remember Gary telling in a sermon was about fishing trips he took as a boy with his dad. He described how much he dreaded getting on that boat and then how bored he was once he was there. He painted this picture of grueling afternoons stuck out in the middle of a lake with only his dad and the fish to keep him company. But as he was telling us the story he confessed he would give nearly anything in the world to be back in that boat with his dad, who died when Gary was quite young. I don't know what scripture he was preaching about and I don't remember any other details of the sermon, but I do remember the yearning in Gary's voice. I remember the regret. And when I think of it now, I'm guessing he felt about his dad something like I'm now feeling about him—missing him, remembering him, wishing him back, and regretting not letting him know how much he meant to me.

Here's where I could take a lesson from the psalmist who is not shy about expressing his feelings. He's telling us to declare our steadfast love in the morning and our faithfulness at night. His encouragement is for us to direct these words to God, but surely we do just that when we share these words and sentiments with each other—for within each one of us dwells the

divine. And when we love each other, we are loving God. And when we love others, we are showing others the love of God.

And that's what Gary did so well. Sure, he made me feel special, but he made everyone else feel special, too. I wasn't the only seedling of faith that he nurtured, he did that for so many of us in his congregations. And that surely must be what God's love is like. It's inclusive, and encompassing, and available for all. And though Gary wasn't God for surely he had his human faults and shortcomings—he was a perfectionist, a control freak, and could be hard to work with—he helped those he encountered to understand God a little bit better. Because Gary loved me, I could imagine how God loved me. He was like the person talked about in this morning's psalm. He was one of those righteous folks who flourished like a palm tree planted in the house of God. Indeed, though he did not reach old age as the psalmist suggests, he did and still does continue to produce fruit. I minister because he first ministered to me. He ministered because there were folks who ministered to him. My ministry here among you does not exist in a vacuum. It is the fruit of many people's faith, hard work, and witness. And I just wish I would have let Gary know that when he was still alive. I wish I would have let him know about all of you—that I'm so happy here and feel so blessed to share this beautiful little corner of God's good creation with you. I wish I would have let him know how good my life is here because I'm quite certain we wouldn't be sharing this moment had God not been at work in the ministry of the late, and to me great, Rev. Gary Hodges.

And so this morning's sermon title—Do They Know?—has a double application. First I ask, do they—meaning the people who are special to you, know that they are? Do they know that you love them, care about them, and appreciate them? And secondly I ask, Do They—your family and friends, or the person you've never met, or the person on the other side of the globe—do they know about God because you are a righteous person who flourishes like a palm tree? Do they know about God's love for them because of the fruit you produce? Are they moving from being seedlings into strong trees because of the way you're nurturing them and the example you're setting for them? Do they know and will they share the message, that same message Gary shared with me because someone shared it with him? Do you minister to others—after all it's not just the one up here in the stole who is a minister—do you minister to others in ways that help them realize that God loves them? Because ministry isn't about what we do, it's about what we allow God to do through us.

And for some of us, we allow God to express sadness, and sorrow, and grief, and joy through us by virtue of our tears. Sometimes it is our falling tears that water the seeds of faith. It is our tears—of joy, love, and sympathy that let people know that we care, that we feel, that we are, indeed, alive. Now all of this doesn't mean that I'm taking a carte blanche attitude to crying in church and that you all need to be wary that it's going to start happening all of the time. But I admit that I take comfort in knowing, that when and if my tears do come again, I've got Gary's stole right here to wipe them away.