

**June 1, 2008, Lake Fellow Sunday**  
**Psalm 46 and Matthew 7:21-29**  
**Second Presbyterian Church (11 a.m. & 6 p.m.)**  
**Rev. Scott B. Hauser**

**“God is Great; God is Good.”**

When a person comes to a new place or joins a new church, there are always first impressions. Over time, some of these impressions are proven false and others are confirmed. I remember vividly my very first impression of Second Presbyterian Church and seems as true to me today as it did the first time I drove up Meridian Street. This is a big church. I grew up in a church whose whole building would fit in this sanctuary. And I had never heard of a church that could build and pay for a \$12M building addition without any mortgage at all. I couldn't have imagined a church staff meeting that filled the common room. And, I'd never been to a service where three or four ministers regularly led worship. This is a very big church.

Even as I continue to be struck by the size and scope of the operation and the ministry of this congregation—I know that we are not big enough. This church isn't big enough to escape the problems common to every church—the problems that face all groups of human beings. The church isn't big enough to prevent its members from experiencing pain or to save them from the challenges in their lives. Members of this church still get sick, still struggle with broken relationships and still face the inevitability of death and loss. If we as a church aren't big enough even to fix ourselves, well, we are certainly not big enough to solve the problems in the world around us. Even setting aside for a moment the huge global crises of hunger and AIDS—right here, in this very city, this very weekend, hundreds of people scurried desperately to find safe refuge from the violent storms...and this church isn't big enough to prevent any of it.

Yet, this is a good church. My life has been richly blessed by the goodness of this congregation. I am deeply grateful for the staff and the officers and the members of this church for the grace that you have shown me and for the things that you have taught me about being faithful, about being a pastor, about following the example of Jesus Christ. This is a good church that serves as a resource and a model for many other congregations, a church committed to bringing the life and the hope of the gospel into all parts of the community and the world. For two years I have had a seat in the front row and I can say without reservation that this is a good church.

And, it is not good enough. Even with all families who are helped by our missions, with all the hearts touched in our worship, with all the visits of care and concern made by pastors and deacons—this church is not good enough to bring healing to all who are in pain, or wholeness to all who are broken.

We are not big enough and we are not good enough. Even if we didn't already know this to be true, even if we hadn't already learned again and again that the church cannot be the answer to all of our problems, our scripture readings for today remind us of this reality. Thankfully, these texts also remind us why our inadequacy is good news after all.

Psalm 46 and Matthew 7—two very different readings with one striking commonality—both were written as sermons. There seems to be something both poetic and appropriate that these two passages would appear in the lectionary on Lake Fellow Sunday.

As Lake Fellows, we get to do good work and we get to do a lot of learning. We work and we learn in all areas of

ministry and one area that gets special attention in our learning is preaching. On Wednesday nights, the Lake Fellows gather with Dr. Galloway in his home and we have dinner together. After dinner we sit in his living room, we watch a video of one of our sermons and we offer critique. As you might imagine, it is a very painful process to watch yourself on video and then to hear from your peers and your boss how you might have done better—it is very painful. And it is very helpful. It is helpful to receive feedback on our own sermons and it is helpful to watch and listen to the sermons of others. So there is something that seems fitting that, after two years of spending Wednesday nights studying sermons, this week's lectionary readings would be sermons themselves.

Psalms 46 is a sermon and it's a sermon that seems a little out of place—an eleven-verse sermon in the middle of a collection of prayers. For the most part, we think of psalms as prayers and songs—of praise, or worship or lament. Usually that's what they are. But this psalm is not a prayer—at least not in the same way as many psalms. Most psalms begin with words of address, My God, O Lord, O God. This Psalm begins with a declaration. “God is our refuge and strength.” That is not the beginning of a prayer—it's a proclamation—a sermon.

Now imagine with me for a moment that the Psalmist has been invited here, to Second Presbyterian Church, to preach this sermon. In order for him to do that, by Tuesday afternoon he would have to email his sermon title to Linda Ryan for the bulletin. Now, since the Psalmist does not have access to email—the title that I suggest for this sermon is God is Great. Whatever its title, Psalm 46 is a fine sermon and it answers exactly the kinds of questions that any preacher aspires to address.

Questions like: Who is God?—“God is our refuge and our strength, a very present help in trouble.” Question—Why is this important? “Because we will not fear, though the earth should change, mountains shake, waters roar.” Question—What about the biggest problems in our lives and the life of the world? Though nations are in an uproar and kingdoms are tottering on destruction, still “the Lord of Hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.” Again and again the Psalmist answers our questions—declaring God is Great. God created the mountains; God is exalted among the nations; God is exalted in the earth. Our church is not big enough—but God is Great.

So we are left with one more question. If we are not big enough and God is Great—what should we do? Again, the Psalmist has an answer and again, we are reminded of what we already know. What should we do?—Stand in awe. “Be still, and know that I am God.”

I have a three-year-old son named Simon. Recently, at a friend's wedding reception, Simon was sitting with my sister-in-law who is seven months pregnant. Now, we had explained that there was a baby living in Aunt Ashlee's belly and Simon was interested, but not really too impressed. At this reception, Ashlee asked Simon if he would like to feel the baby kick. Simon looked a little surprised and nodded. Ashlee took his hand and held it to place where the baby was kicking and Simon's eyes lit up with a joy and a wonder that words can hardly describe. He looked at Ashlee and he smiled—and he stood in awe. Simon didn't understand exactly what was happening. He doesn't know about gestational development, or prenatal vitamins, or emergency C-sections. But he didn't need to understand everything to know that something amazing and very good was happening. That's what standing in awe is all about.

Matthew 7 picks up the sermon message almost exactly where Psalm 46 leaves off. If Jesus were going to send a sermon title to Linda Ryan, I would suggest—God is Good. That seems like a fitting title for a message preached by Jesus. If we were a little bit surprised to find a sermon nestled in the book of Psalms, this sermon, from the gospel of Matthew, is just exactly where we expect it to be...and from the preacher whom we most long to hear.

So neither the source, nor the preacher, of this sermon is surprising to us; but the opening words are so sharp as to be downright jarring. Jesus opens this final section of his sermon with these words. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven.” In fact, Jesus says, “on that day many will say, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’” In response to these pleas, Jesus responds, “I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.” These words of judgment and rejection sound very strange coming from Jesus. We wonder, ‘How can the one who is the very incarnation of God’s love, speak so harshly?’ ‘How is it that the savior of the world would send away those who have cast out demons, and done deeds of power in his name?’ ‘How can a message that starts with words of condemnation carry the title, “God is Good?”’

These hard words are directed at people who have been doing good. Jesus is speaking to do-gooders when he says, “I never knew you. Go away from me.” Because it’s not enough. Doing good is never enough, no matter how hard we try, no matter how much we do. Jesus is saying—it’s not about us doing good. Because we can’t do it alone...and thank God for that. Thank God that our healing and our salvation cannot and do not depend on us. We are not good enough and we don’t have to be—because God is. God is Good. So we do not enter the kingdom of heaven because we are a big church or because we are a good church. We do not enter the kingdom of heaven because we are the ones who do the most good. Instead, we are invited to enter because God is Good. We enter the kingdom of heaven because we know who the king is.

Jesus says, “not everyone who cries ‘Lord, Lord,’ but only those who do the will of my Father in heaven.” What is the will of the Father? “Be still and know that I am God.” Remember that God is Great and God is Good and we are neither—and so we stand in awe. And it’s impossible to stand in awe when we are busy doing and so we remind ourselves to be still. Be still. It’s not easy. The temptation to do is very great. We are told to produce, to work hard, to make good use of our time. We are told that being still is a luxury at best and a mark of laziness at worst. So we get drawn in—to spending more hours at work, to the myth of keeping the perfect home, even to spending hours upon hours volunteering at the hospital, or the food pantry or the church.

To be sure, we are called to serve others and to love those whom God loves—but our goal must never be to hear people say, “What a great church we have!” Rather, “What a great God we have!” May it be our goal, as individuals and as a people of God—to put ourselves in places where we are reminded to be still and to stand in awe, to remember the joy and the wonder that comes from knowing that God is Great...and God is Good. Amen.