

GOT RHYTHM?
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University Congregational Church

Reading: *The Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises* – Nikos Kazantzakis

“I put my body through its paces like a war horse; I keep clean, sturdy, prepared. I harden it and I pity it. I have no other steed.

I keep my brain wide awake, lucid, unmerciful. I unleash it to battle relentlessly so that, all light, it may devour the darkness of the flesh. I have no other workshop where I may transform darkness into light.

I keep my heart flaming, courageous, relentless. I feel in my heart all commotions and all contradictions, the joys and sorrows of life. But I struggle to subdue them to a rhythm superior to that of the mind, harsher than that of my heart – to the ascending rhythm of the Universe.”¹

If you were wondering, or worried, or hoping that this was going to be a sermon on the rhythm method of birth control or the advanced moves in salsa dancing you can be either relieved or disappointed. Rather, I propose that we recover the rhythm of life. By that I mean the rhythms of nature, family, work, play, and spirituality. I mean most emphatically the rhythm of God.

I say recover because I think we have lost rhythm. We have become obsessed with speed, efficiency, the bottom line, and task completion – or better yet – multi-tasking. We expect our computers,

¹ Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises*, as quoted in *A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants* edited by Rueben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1983), 115.

palm pilots, and cell phones to send and receive more information more quickly than ever. We want them to store more information and process it in nanoseconds. Search engines like Google pride themselves on how much information they can send to your computer in the least amount of time. Our lives have been redefined by volume, schedules, and deadlines.

Robert Benson described it this way:

“In the society in which we live, the primary rule of work seems to be to cram as much into the hours of the day as you can. The longer you work and the more exhausted you are, the more status you seem to have. Nobody wants to admit that they are so unimportant that they do not have to come in on Saturdays just to keep up with their mail. If you can have a car phone and a home fax and a beeper so that any client or customer or boss or employee can get hold of you anytime, anywhere, for anything, then you really are something.

We have power breakfasts, business lunches, and client dinners. We even take working vacations, a term whose meaning escapes me somehow.”²

I submit to you that there is a relationship between such lifestyles and the millions of people who are depressed, anxious, over medicated, estranged and divorced. And I further believe that such crisis comes with the loss of rhythm. Our lives no longer hang in the balance. We are just hanging.

Nature provides us plenty of evidence that life is about rhythm.

Consider the ebb and flood of tides; the rising and setting of the sun; the dance of seasons and the movements of constellations. Consider the

² Robert Benson, *Living Prayer* (New York: Penguin, 1998), pp. 70-71.

cycles of fertility in the animal kingdom that often rely on tide, and moon, and season. Remember the flow of seed, root and stem, leaf, and flower and fruit. Like Shiva, Nature dances the creation into and out of being, through the passages of life and death and rebirth.

There is also a rhythm in the social course of human development. We are born as dependents and grow to maturity. We assume the role of adulthood. We procreate and sustain new life. We age and reenter some level of dependency before we die.

We know in our hearts that we are healthiest when we perceive and accept the rhythm of life. The fundamental principle of Taoism is the perception of the movement and flow of nature and to live within the laws of nature. The more we deny and fight the natural flow of life the more likely it is that we will be unhappy and suffer. The more we avoid the human condition and pretend that we can live beyond our limitations the more likely it is that we will be oppressed and miserable.

Now most of us have a daily rhythm. Take my morning routine, for example. I get up in the morning and the first thing I do is make coffee. Emily gets up and I make our breakfast. Mimi brushes out Emily's hair and she gets on the bus. I will watch the news for about half an hour. I go into the living room for twenty or thirty minutes of prayer and

meditation, which includes the reading of scripture and poetry.

Sometimes I write in my journal. After that I feed the animals, exercise, shower, and get ready for work.

Upset this routine and my day just does not seem right. My mind, body, and soul are just not the same. It all becomes irregular. I feel out of sorts. I am out of step and the day is without its rhythm. On a broader scale, I also lose my balance when I never have time to play, or relax, or spend some time with Mimi, just the two of us. All of us have a rhythm of rest, work, play, marriage, family, and community. When any one of these elements consumes us we can no longer dance to the rhythm of life. We become disoriented and sometimes obsessed.

Have you thought about the fact that the religious life also has a rhythm? The church, for example, follows the rhythm of faith: the hope of Advent; the joy of Christmas; the mission of Epiphany; the penance of Lent; the sacrifice of Holy Week; the exclamation of Easter; and the power of Pentecost. Then we enter into that long season of “Ordinary Time” that typically wanders from June until the end of November. In this movement of faith we celebrate birth, ministry, passion, death, transformation, planting and harvesting. Woven through this faithful fabric are weddings, baptisms, memorials, and Holy Communion. The

whole tapestry of life is a rhythm of wholeness. And just like our daily lives, the health of a congregation is measured by the rhythm and balance of its liturgy. If a church obsesses with death and punishment it becomes angry and judgmental. If we can only see the baby Jesus and Easter lilies we are naïve about the demands of faith to transform the suffering in this world. If we only perceive the empty tomb we forget the cost of discipleship. The church is healthy only when we engage the full rhythm of faith and life.

In the reading this morning, Nikos Kazantzakis speaks of spiritual powers and disciplines. He speaks of one whose body, mind, and heart are prepared and disciplined to do the will of God. He desires nothing more than to be a soldier of God's light. But this depends on his ability to move with a rhythm superior to his mind – “the ascending rhythm of the Universe.” He knows that his heart is filled with all of the joys and sorrows, desires and temptations of any human being. The question is always whether his will and the will of God are in rhythm. God's is a higher rhythm and we are called to this Universal rhythm.

Now every one of us who grew up in the Christian church has heard all of our lives that we are meant to do the will of God. We pray, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” We wonder what is God's will

for us. We question if the death of a loved one or a natural disaster is the will of God. And even if we could know the will of God we are always faced with the challenge of doing the will of God.

Kazantzakis is not going to answer all of our questions. But he is going to insist on bending our will to God's. He writes:

“The Cry within me is a call to arms. It shouts, ‘I, the Cry, am the Lord your God! I am not an asylum. I am not hope and a home. I am not the Father nor the Son, nor the Holy Ghost. I am your General!

You are not my slave, nor a plaything in my hands. You are not my friend, you are not my child. You are my comrade-in-arms!

Hold courageously the passes which I entrusted to you; do not betray them. You are in duty bound, and you may act heroically by remaining at your own battle station.

Love danger. What is most difficult? That is what I want! Which road should you take? The most craggy ascent! It is the one I also take: follow me!

Learn to obey. Only he who obeys a rhythm superior to his own is free.

Learn to command. Only he who can give commands may represent me here on earth.

Love responsibility. Say: ‘It is my duty, and mine alone, to save the earth. If it is not saved, then I alone am to blame.’”³

There are some who might be thinking, “Thank God that’s not in the Bible. We might actually have to do something.” It is not the knowing of God’s will that is so difficult. It is the doing of it. We know the kind of

³ Ibid.

human beings that God call us to be. It is the being of God's will that is our downfall.

Kazantzakis is demanding something more than belief. He certainly rejects any notion of God that might be at home on Walton's mountain, snapping beans on the front porch and affirming the self-esteem of the children.

The God Kazantzakis reveals has one clear mission – to save the earth. God does not ask for doctrinal affirmation of the Trinity. God does not seek paternal relationships with God's people. This God insists that human beings, you and me, share God's responsibility for saving the earth. "You are my comrades-in-arms." This is the Universal rhythm that brings light to darkness and redeems human flesh. God is not asking for more prayers, more offerings, more hymns, or more sermons. God is calling us to bear with God the work of bringing transformation of the earth and all of her people.

There is no vision here of the "sweet by and by." There is a call to arms. Be courageous! Stand your ground! Hold fast to that which is good! Love danger! Take a chance on that which is most difficult and daunting. Know the relationship between obedience and don't be afraid

to take command and make changes happen. Love responsibility! Love your responsibility and do your duty to save the earth.

This is the faith of an adult. Kazantzakis sees the human being as a partner with God. As adults we have responsibilities to nurture and care for those who are vulnerable and weak. As adults we have responsibility to care for the ecosystem. As adults we have the responsibility to end violence and poverty. This is the Universal rhythm of transformation. This is the Universal dance of salvation. This is the pulse of Universal love. This is the cadence of Universal grace. And Kazantzakis insists that this is what responsible faith looks like. Hear this poem by R. S.

Thomas entitled, "The Coming."

“And God held in his hand
a small globe. Look, he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows; a bright
Serpent, a river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.

On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many people
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.”⁴

Adult faith is called to the barren that it might be fruitful. We are sent to the scorched earth to water the parched and thirsty. We are brought to polluted rivers to make them clean. We are called to those outstretched arms of despair and bring them hope. These are the rhythms of God, the same God who commands us to the partnership of restoration and renewal.

I believe that peace will come when we dance to the Eternal rhythm. I believe that community will come when we move to Sacred pulses. I believe that wholeness will come when we beat the drum of God’s grace by our will, our actions, and our being.

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⁴R.S. Thomas, *R.S. Thomas: Everyman’s Poetry* (London: Everyman, 1996), 72.