

"Purpose and Place"

Psalm 8; Romans 12:9-18

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

October 29, 2017 – 21st Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Imagine yourself standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon. Its vast crater extends before you as far as you can see. The colors and shapes are as different as one can imagine. It is a strange beauty, but an undeniable one. The view is like no other, anywhere. It is such splendor that it is hard to communicate this to someone who has not been there. Words can never fully describe what your eyes can see.

The actual distance from the North Rim to the South Rim is 14 miles but, if you want to drive there, it will take you over 200 miles around the east end of the canyon. Now there is one other way to get across, and that's by a trail going along the floor of the canyon. You can cross by that route in two days on mule back if you are adventuresome.

Not much has changed about the Grand Canyon from the time in 1939 when newspaper columnist Ernie Pyle was there. He, too, heard about the mule trip and, though he was skeptical, he made a few inquiries.

He asked the man at the lodge desk, "Is the trail scary?"

"No, it isn't scary," the clerk said. "Of course, there are stretches where you look straight down for a thousand feet. But the trail is eight feet wide and you couldn't push a mule off with a locomotive."

"My great worry," confessed Pyle, "was not over the mule's staying on the trail, but about **my** staying on the mule."

Whether you're up to that trip or not, the scenery is hard to imagine; then it's equally as hard to forget. Photographs give you a feel for it, but never an accurate portrayal. It is more immense than any camera can capture. It has a depth so real that a two-dimensional print doesn't even begin to bring it to life.

You can't be there and not feel a sense of awe and wonder. Not surprisingly almost everyone reports experiencing the same thing upon first arrival, that of feeling so small and insignificant in the midst of this mammoth natural wonder.

Niagara Falls is another place that brings up such feelings. It's really three separate falls—American, Horseshoe, and Bridal Veil—and almost a million gallons of water a second from the Niagara River flows over them. The water drops from a height equal to a 20-story building and the surging flow has tremendous power to it. You can see it and you can hear it. Mist fills the air everywhere in the proximity of the falls.

One of the earliest Europeans to view this spectacular sight was a French priest by the name of Hennepin in 1678. Fr. Hennepin is reported to have fallen to his knees in prayer upon seeing it and said, "The universe does not afford its parallel." I wonder how many Native Americans before that had been likewise moved, but history unfortunately leaves us no record of their reaction. People today are still awe-struck by its overwhelming beauty.

Imagine now a night in your own backyard, or when you went camping, or sometime from your past. It's a clear night, a still night, and there are thousands of stars in the sky. They blink and they twinkle and they form themselves into patterns that remind us of familiar objects like a dipper. Some stars are brighter than others, and the moon outshines them all. When you look up you just can't fathom the distances involved and the actual size of those tiny points of light. If you stop long enough to think about what you see, it forces you to consider your small place in its vastness.

That was certainly the experience of the author of our psalm for this morning, who also looked up at the sky. He rhapsodized, "O Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! When I look at the heavens, the works of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"

"Yet you have crowned them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet.... O Lord, how great is your name in all the world."

I've been to the Grand Canyon and Niagara Falls and seen those magnificent spots first-hand. Perhaps many of you have been there, too. And who hasn't looked up at the nighttime sky? We've seen things that we can just barely begin to comprehend. Our relationship to such vast spectacles is like a single grain of sand to a wide beach. We feel our insignificance in the face of all this. The psalmist reminds us that the feeling isn't new. It has been part of the human experience for as long as we have been upon the earth.

The psalm writer captures a universal feeling and puts it into words. It is the question of "Who am I?" set in a grander scale and addressed to God: "What are human beings that you even think of them, mere mortals that you care for them?"

"Lord," the psalmist says, "we feel so tiny in comparison to the entirety of your creation. We're just a small part of the total. We who think so much of ourselves are humbled when we realize our true ratio to the whole, and the entire earth, in turn, is but a speck in the universe. You, God, are greater than the whole of what you have created.

The psalmist might continue, "We humans are but nothing in this entire scheme, and I am just a single fraction of all those who live on the face of this earth. Yet, you say that you know me and care for me. I am a mere nothing, but your love makes me someone because I am known to you. You made me and you claim me."

The psalmist reminds us, too, that God has entrusted the primary care of this world to the human family. By our uniqueness as self-conscious beings, we have sovereignty over all other creatures; yet, with that honor comes responsibility. We are to work with the natural laws of the world and not against them. We are caretakers and not owners. Stewards and not consumers.

In all this God gives us purpose, a sense of place within life; but it is purpose and place in relationship to our Creator. Without that point of attachment we would be adrift on the sea of life. We have no real identity when we only look to ourselves. It is God, and God alone who gives us a sense of place, and with that, a sense of worth.

In our Epistle reading this morning, Paul reminds us that to have a sense of place doesn't mean we stand alone. Rather, we are part of the human fabric—woven together—and it is God we honor when we respect each other. "Let love be genuine," Paul says. "Love one another with mutual affection. Contribute to the needs of others; extend hospitality to strangers. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

"Live in harmony with one another. Don't consider yourself somehow superior.... Don't repay a wrong deed with another, but consider what is noble in the sight of all. So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

Most of the time we get so caught up with all the mundane things of life that it clutters our vision for anything greater. We lose sight of the trust placed in us for the care of this world. We lose sight of others as our brothers and sisters in the larger human family. We lose sight of God as both our starting point and ending point and everything in between.

Isn't that part of the reason we have come here today, so that we can remember who we are individually and also to recognize who we are as people linked together? We come to give recognition to God as almighty.

Here in this particular community we call Highlands we walk the way of Jesus together. As it is within any human family, this is a place where we have a chair waiting for us around the table. We're known here and we're missed when we're absent. Here we grow in our faith, but also reach out and welcome others to join with us in spiritual journey. Some of you here today may relate to another congregation in a similar way.

Being part of a faith family helps us to better realize our sense of place within the vastness of God's world. Being a part of a church gives us a home where we are loved and where we can discover and develop our gifts of service. We all have something to contribute to the whole of our congregational life and we all have benefits to claim. Our church is caring and creative and generous, a place to thrive and grow.

From the beginning of time to its end, from the height of the skies to the depths of the oceans, from the tiny microbe to the incredible beings that we humans are— of all this God is the Creator and Sustainer. Each of us matters and each of us has been granted a unique spot in the world, a place to stand. From that assurance we can go on to discover our unique

purpose and develop our full potential. With that awareness we can discover the contribution to God's Kingdom that is ours alone to make, not separate and apart but within Christ's family.

Lord, our Lord, how majestic [indeed] is your name throughout the earth!