

“So ... What Are We Afraid Of?”

Rev. David Gregory

June 12, 2022

1st Sunday after Pentecost



Ripe Tomatoes
Robert Duncan

Readings

John 16:12-13

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

I still have many things to tell you, but you can't handle them now. But when the Friend comes, the Spirit of the Truth, he will take you by the hand and guide you into all the truth there is. He won't draw attention to himself, but will make sense out of what is about to happen and, indeed, out of all that I have done and said.

David Whyte

in *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment, and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*

Human beings are always, and always will be, a frontier between what is known and what is not known. The act of turning any part of the unknown into the known is simply an invitation for an equal measure of the unknown to flow in and reestablish that frontier: to reassert the far horizon of an individual life; to make us what we are—that is—a moving edge between what we know about ourselves and what we are about to become. What we are actually about to become or are afraid of becoming always trumps and rules over what we think we are already.

Over the last couple of weeks, folded in with all the news of violence, war, and insurrection, we've had a slightly welcome distraction with the celebration of Queen Elizabeth's platinum jubilee. The algorithms of the internet seem to read my DNA, and have detected that my extraction is more than 90% English, and so my news feed apparently skews Anglo. I see no superiority in my British roots. It's more just a matter of understanding what *is*. My mother did not wear hats, but when I look at the Queen, I definitely recognize the hairdo, the glasses and the handbags, and when I see her smile, I somehow feel at home. It's hard to explain. But after seventy years in the spotlight, the Queen has now been upstaged, and by her three most famous great-grandchildren. The world is obsessed with the temper tantrums, particularly of Louis and George, and whether or not Kate has any control over them. It's like when children act up in church and all the white-headed people glare at them or click their tongues.

When I see the faces of those little royals, it reminds me of my own boys who had an even bigger cross to bear by being preacher's kids, their behavior under the constant scrutiny of a roomful of people who expected that if the minister was to have any credibility at all, his children would need to be well-behaved and sit quietly with their hands folded. I can just tell you, they did not. And when I saw the faces of those little princes in the news this week, I felt I knew exactly what was being said between them and their parents. The grimaces say, "When is this going to be over?" "How long do I have to stand here?" "Why can't we just go home?" Or in the case of a road trip, "When are we going to get there?" We would never in a million years say this to them directly, but the fact is, "The joy is in the journey, son." Speak it at your own peril.

Let's face it. It's not just children, royal or otherwise, who are subject to this kind of impatience. As humans, we just want to get to where we're going. We are consumed with the idea of a destination. Our joy, we think, resides in outcomes. If certain conditions are met, we will be content and happy. Once we "get there," we'll shift to overdrive and all shall be well. Until then, we might be a little cranky. But this is not descriptive of the creative force of human nature. David Whyte speaks of the human "us" as the eternal frontier between what is known and unknown, that constant moving edge between what we are and what we are becoming. It is a never-ending process.

The answer to "When are we gonna get there?" is that there is no "there" to get to. We're in a permanent state of becoming. This is not often a satisfying answer for princes, preachers' kids, or even to the rest of us. We think we thrive on stability, status quo, homeostasis. Tell me how to be, and I'll be that. Tell me what to do, and I'll do that. I want everything to be predictable. I want this sense of overdrive so that my anxieties about the future can be alleviated. I need to know how to plan. Is that so?

It may interest you to know that if you've ever had feelings like that, then you are absolutely normal, just like the disciples of Jesus. You see, they expected that the coming of a Messianic kingdom would solve all their problems, that it would usher in a world of justice, peace, and love. They saw no way to effect any change around the domination of Rome unless someone did it for them. When Jesus told them that the kingdom of heaven was close by, they said, "Then give it to us." Let us have this thing. Put it in our hands and then we will be happy and at peace. It was something they wished to receive rather than create. Instead of finding their growing edge, they looked for the final product—like some heavenly lotto ticket that would pay off immediately. This is why they so often rebuffed Jesus when he would speak of his departure. Their view of the future did not include the idea of an "advocate" who would remind them of the things Jesus had taught them. It was hard for them to embrace the idea of a mystical presence of the Divine, a Holy Spirit who would dwell within them, an intuitive force that would guide them in the beautiful work of co-creating a more just and loving world.

They asked Jesus more than once, "Is this the time that you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" Maybe he didn't say no to them outright—not in so many words. But perhaps he was saying something like, "Oh dear ones, you're missing the whole point." If this all came at once, it would be like eating all the food you will ever eat in your lifetime all at one sitting. It would be like trying to quench your thirst from a fire hose. Not only is it too much at once, it goes against the very nature of all that is human and divine. Being created in the image of the Divine means that we are created to be creators—creators who create by design and not by default, creators who find joy in the process, who savor with all the senses those wonderful gifts that come to everyone who waits. But it's not just the waiting. It's also the watching, the marveling, the wide-eyed anticipation of seeing it all unfold.

Yes, the realm of the divine was at hand, but it wasn't some gift that just dropped out of heaven into our laps. It's the mystery of a leavening, the energizing of something that was previously raw materials, that when they came together in reaction and life-force, mediated by creative human hands, produced a wonderful, delicious aromatic loaf of bread. It's like my daily practice of tending the tomato plant on my deck, seeing it grow day after day, as it develops blooms, and later the fruit. There's a magnificent moment when you cut into that delicious home-grown tomato and understand that you've been there every step of the way. I could look at that tomato plant every day and say, "When are you going to get here?" "Are you almost here yet?" "Why don't you grow faster?" "Why are you making us wait?" The fact is, I can walk right down the street and go into any number of stores and buy a mealy, tasteless, nearly colorless tomato. But I won't have the joy of participating in the tending and watering of this new creation, or of enjoying something beautiful, delicious, and wonderful when the time is just right.

Pentecost has unleashed something new in us: an awareness of process, an awe at the energy of life. We elect our government officials to fix everything overnight. We look for the perfect partner who will make us happy every moment of the day. We order freshly prepared food at a restaurant and are disappointed when it does not arrive in five minutes or less. Oh, but why would we want to ruin everything by insisting on what we want *right now*? The power of Pentecost is way more fun. The unfolding of creation is far more satisfying. Let us surrender our Prince Louis moments to the process of growth. Let's feed and water the tomato and enjoy the fruits of harvest. We are all creators. Why not enjoy the process?

