

“A Whole New Realm”

Rev. David Gregory

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Pentecost 4



Readings

Richard Rohr

from his book *Everything Belongs*

Whenever we're led out of normalcy into sacred space, it's going to feel like suffering. It's letting go of what we're used to. That causes suffering. But part of us always has to die. If that readiness isn't there, we won't enter into sacred space. The prophet leads us into sacred space by showing us the insufficiency of the old order; the role of the priest is to teach us how to live in the new realm. . . . In this new realm, everything belongs.

In mature religion, the secular becomes sacred. There are no longer two worlds. We no longer have to leave the secular world to find sacred space because they've come together.

Mark 4:26-29

from the New Revised Standard Version

The realm of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.

Every day we are surrounded by miracles, and I'm not talking about the kind where some far-away God interrupts the flow of nature to do something spectacular. I'm talking about the miracles of nature, the sorts of things that routinely remind us of the Divine Wisdom who works with us, in us, and through us; the Spirit who is as close to us as our own breath; the inspiration of human life, human desire, and co-creation. We can scatter a few dead-looking seeds on the ground, add a little moisture and wait, and just when we think that nothing will come of them, a few little green sprouts will appear. We don't know how. Scientifically we can explain the process of germination. We can describe what happens in the process of natural growth, but the energy that brings it all forward, the thing that we casually refer to as "life"—this is the wonder and the mystery that infuses everything there is, from the birthing of a tiny human into this world to the birthing of a human soul from this world into another realm, and everything in between.

The gospels contain boundless treasures of metaphor, as Jesus taught these unexplainable things to people who had little reference point for any of it. They wanted to know how he was going to help them out from under the oppressive forces of their day, and he gave strong voice to their yokes of bondage, speaking out against the violence, oppression, and injustice that kept them locked in despair. But he also told them of a world that was to come. In the patriarchal language of his day, Jesus referred to it as the “kingdom” of heaven. In the twenty-first century we would call it a higher realm, a new way of being, living, loving, and creating. It wasn’t in some far-off heaven either, for he spoke of it many times as being very near.

Jesus’s major metaphors for this new realm centered in natural processes of germination and plant growth as seen in the parables of the sower, the mustard seed, or the soil itself. He told his hearers that it was like yeast that would cause a lump of dough to take on an entirely new character. In every case, it was something that was always happening in the present moment, unseen, unnoticed, unexplained, but definitely happening. And usually it was seen in the context of something dead or powerless that contained surprising life force, as in the story of resurrection, and the empty tomb. As with the power of germination, something that for all intents and purposes is dead pushes against the limitations of its circumstance, against all odds, defying prediction.

The way of the universe is that the last will be first, every valley will be exalted, and every desert a flowing stream. In the teachings of Jesus, that’s just how it is, and the longer we follow him the clearer this becomes. We may not always see it happening, but it is there. It is growing it is effective, and most of all it is unstoppable. It’s a whole new realm, and it’s happening right here, right now. If we can pause long enough and go deeply enough into the present moment, we can easily find it, as much and as often as we need to, finding (as the Apostle put it) grace to help us in time of need. If you ask me *What is the essence of Christian faith?*, I would say that it is exactly this. Nothing more and nothing less.

I find this same essential quality in the writings of Richard Rohr, inviting us in our own language, space, and time, to consider the same things. The “higher realm” as he describes it is a call to non-dual thinking. Included in the germ of our present moment is the realization that our old ways of being, thinking, and doing are falling away, and something new is coming. From centuries steeped in a religion of “otherness,” caught in the dualism of “us vs. them,” the physical vs. the spiritual, light vs. shadow, in this time of New Reformation, it has begun to dawn on us that in Rohr’s words, “everything belongs.”

At the risk of over-simplifying, a global pandemic has done nothing but accelerate this reformation, peeling away the layers of who we are and how we do what we do, until our old dualisms fall away, like the hulls of seeds breaking open for something entirely new to grow from them. Rohr says it this way:

Whenever we’re led out of normalcy into sacred space, it’s going to feel like suffering. It’s letting go of what we’re used to. That causes suffering. But part of us always has to die. If that readiness isn’t there, we won’t enter into sacred space. The prophet leads us into sacred space by showing us the insufficiency of the old order; the role of the priest is to teach us how to live in the new realm. . . . In this new realm, everything belongs.

There are many moments in life that call us to new levels of maturity. I'm sure that I have prodded my own sons when they were children, telling them to "grow up," to "act like an adult," even before they had been given time to do so. It was something I no doubt heard from my own parents, from teachers, or other significant adults. Maturity or adulthood was the standard by which we were often measured and found wanting. Eventually we found our way successfully into a new realm of freedom and responsibility where we experienced times of trial and adversity. Looking back, these adversities are signals of our growth. We didn't necessarily know how it happened, but sure enough, from the ashes rose new life. Again and again, we have lived our own cycles of death and resurrection, and continue to live them now. It's how we grow.

As we contemplate and navigate the many new realms of being that have been opened to us during the last year and a half, I think we can honestly say that we are different people from what we were before. Our individual lives have called us to grow in ways that are undeniable. Perhaps we've become more comfortable with solitude, more resourceful in our personal lives, less reliant upon our vehicles and our calendars to shape our days and to give our lives meaning. As changed people we come together into a church that has also changed. As Richard Rohr reminds us, letting go of what we are used to can often feel like suffering. Our suffering isn't caused by the changes that have occurred in our lives, but by the ways we think about them. Are we fearful? Are we excited? Are we bewildered or energized by the opportunity to create new pathways? As Jesus told his friends, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." An entirely new realm is near. A different order of things is possible, and if we are willing, we can be midwives of the new reformation.

As we move into the process of regathering (or more precisely, gathering in new ways), we must individually and collectively develop our muscles of readiness. This has been the experience of humankind time and time again. As a church, we've done this many times, and now we have the privilege of doing it again. I think we have it within us to move courageously into this sacred space, and I for one am eager for it to happen. What an exciting time to be alive!

