

## “Now Is the Only Time There Is”

Rev. David Gregory

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Pentecost 6



### Readings

John 14:27 from the *Amplified Bible*

“Peace I leave with you; My perfect peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be afraid. Let My perfect peace calm you in every circumstance and give you courage and strength for every challenge.”

Richard Rohr from his book *Silent Compassion: Finding God in Contemplation*

You do not hear silence, but it is that by which you do hear. You cannot capture silence. It captures you. Silence is a kind of thinking that is not thinking. It’s a kind of thinking which mostly sees. Silence is alternative consciousness. It is a form of intelligence, a form of knowing beyond bodily reacting or emotion. It is a form of knowing beyond mental analysis, which is what we usually call “thinking ... .” I used to think that mysticism was the eventual fruit of years of contemplation; now I think it all begins with one clear moment of mystic consciousness, which then becomes the constant “spring inside us, welling up unto eternal life.”

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You have heard me extend this invitation many times, and undoubtedly you will hear it again and again, just like you are hearing it now:

*Let us release our regrets from the past; let us let go of our anxieties about the future, and enter fully into the present moment, which is where all of life is lived.*

Over the course of my life, I have gradually come to embrace this simple statement, to remind myself that presence is indeed a practice. It came to me as a child, really, in an informal but powerful way from Esther Starbuck, my Quaker grandmother, who would ask me at times to sit with her on the front porch. It may not sound very exciting to younger generations who’ve been trained to expect far more intensive stimuli. “Let’s see what we see,” she would say. That was it; it was no more complicated than that. It was an

exercise in noticing, or more precisely in noticing what we were noticing. It may have been a squirrel scampering across a power line, a neighbor lady obsessively manicuring her lawn, the sound of birds singing in the buckeye tree, or a radio blaring from a passing car. It was more than cheap entertainment. It was an exercise in presence. I don't think my grandmother was doing this consciously. She was the product of a lineage and a culture that held silence as a core value, and somehow on a warm summer afternoon, sipping weak, unsweetened iced tea garnished with mint leaves, I got the download for myself.

I never really thought of it as a "thing;" maybe just a preference. Peace. Quiet. Solitude. Silence. As I grew older, these formed an easy and natural pathway, like smooth stones across a shallow stream, to meditation, contemplation, mindfulness, centering, grounding. There are many words for it, but these qualities are like doorways into the same room, or multiple wells dug into a common underground stream.



This way of being became the vision for our Friday spiritual practices. People may find their opening through some of our other offerings, such as Wednesday communion, Stone Soup on Thursdays, or through Praktikos, led by Richard Pavek on Tuesdays. Some find it through practicing yoga with Diana or Christopher. My personal vision for this congregation is that we develop a miles-long list of contemplative workshops, retreats, events and practices. No single practice fits everyone, but if there are enough doors presented so that everyone finds a way in, or if enough wells are dug so that everyone drinks from the living water, we will have done our good work to create something desperately needed in our world, which is spiritual community. We needn't create an institution based upon doctrinal agreement to a set of dogmas. There's no need for that. It is far better for us, I think, to create a pool of experiences so broad and so beautiful, that anyone can come into the room or into the Zoom and find their own sense of Divine Presence.

Jesus, we are told, offered his friends the gift of perfect peace, the kind which is not found in the cultural noise that so easily distracts us. He showed them what he meant by modeling a consistent tendency to find solitude—in the desert, on the sea, in the garden, or in an upper room. In our day we have many models for this same practice, and in some ways the last sixteen months have enforced a kind of solitude unprecedented in our lifetimes. We may have taken kindly to this silence, or it may have been a difficult process. Either way, it has brought us to *this* present moment, where there are new adjustments to be made. We're getting used to bringing our solitary selves into a public venue once again, and I'll be very honest and say that it is at times overwhelming.

On Monday evening, Tripp and I dined out for our anniversary, and with the persistent marine layer and some wind, we chose for the first time to dine indoors at a restaurant. The food was delicious, but the noise level was an assault on our other senses. It harkened us back to one of our pet peeves in New York City: the vanishing of quiet restaurants. One by one, we'd see places that we used to enjoy being remodeled into concrete-floored "food-nasiums," with people at your own table shouting to be heard over other people, who were also shouting to be heard over loud reverberating music. For me this is a telling metaphor for what our world has become, with the noise of media, or popular culture, or news outlets trying to outshout each other, politicians screaming at each other, public figures doing everything in their power to outdo each other with more likes, more tweets, more attention, more donations. Apparently their grandmothers never sat them on a porch with weak tea to look at the squirrels. And I have such deep gratitude for the entertainment value of squirrels.

Thank you for indulging me in this invitation to silent presence. It is my lifeline. It is that which speaks to me, that which nourishes me and quenches my spiritual thirsts. I think that our friends like John Philip Newell, David Whyte, Mary Oliver, and Richard Rohr (to name a few), offer us this same gift of “perfect peace” that Jesus offered to his friends. As Richard Rohr says,

*You do not hear silence, but it is that by which you do hear. You cannot capture silence. It captures you. Silence is a kind of thinking that is not thinking. It’s a kind of thinking which mostly sees. Silence is alternative consciousness. It is a form of intelligence, a form of knowing beyond bodily reacting or emotion. It is a form of knowing beyond mental analysis, which is what we usually call thinking.*

For as many years as I continue preaching, writing, or teaching, I’m going to be talking about the pandemic. I cannot help it, and I do not need to stop. It has become the defining experience of our lifetimes, reverberating across the generations, as it has echoed all over the earth. We can all speak of how it has changed us, but for me it has returned me to a place of childlike silence. It has disconnected me from the pressurized din of life and given me an opportunity to “see” things again—things I had forgotten to remember, things that are simple and quiet and essential.

I hope that you will join me in traveling this quiet path, and that you will sit on the porch with me and do the thinking that mostly just sees and knows within and beyond the body. Rather than mindlessly returning to the life that was, why don’t we just “see what we see?”

