

“Special Editions”

Rev. David Gregory

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Pentecost 8



Readings

Luke 4:18 from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

God’s Spirit is on me;
he’s chosen me to preach the message of good news to the poor,
Sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and
recovery of sight to the blind,
To set the burdened and battered free,
to announce, “This is God’s time to shine!”

“The Good News”

a poem from *Call Me By My True Names* by Thich Nhat Hanh

They don’t publish
the good news.
The good news is published by us.
We have a special edition every moment,
and we need you to read it.
The good news is that you are alive,
and the linden tree is still there,
standing firm in the harsh winter.
The good news is that you have wonderful eyes
to touch the blue sky.
The good news is that your child is there before you,
and your arms are available:
Hugging is possible.
They only print what is wrong.

Look at each of our special editions.
We always offer the things that are not wrong.
We want you to benefit from them
and help protect them.
The dandelion is there by the sidewalk,
smiling its wondrous smile,
singing the song of eternity.
Listen! You have ears that can hear it.
Bow your head.
Listen to it.
Leave behind the world of sorrow
and preoccupation
and get free.
The latest good news is that you can do it.

One of the things I love most about our gathered community is our growing ability to see things as they are. We all know the common idea that there are two kinds of people: those who see a glass half empty and those who see it half full. It's the old binary between optimism and pessimism, suggesting that there isn't any other way to see things. The optimist is called a Pollyanna and the pessimist is just a wet blanket. The former is disconnected from reality, and the latter is just a bummer to be around. What if we could see in a single unified way things as they are **and** things as we would like them to be, without having to separate the two? In other words, what if we could simply notice that it's a single glass, part of which is full and part of which is empty? Life is light **and** life is shadow. One does not exist without the other, and together they express a tension that keeps life moving forward in a dynamic way. A simple illustration is in our practice of prayer, with equal parts of gratitude and concern. It's not a prayer of gratitude **or** a prayer of concern, it is prayer, which is just another form of respiration. One is the inhaling, the other exhaling.

The apostle Paul encouraged the Christians at Philippi not to worry about anything, but to pray about everything, letting their requests be made known from a place of deep thankfulness. The result, he said, would be a sense of peace that surpasses human understanding. Jesus, we are told, came to "preach good news" to the poor, to announce forgiveness for all who were imprisoned, to give blind people their sight, and to enable those who are oppressed to escape their oppressors. These kinds of outcomes are not just good news. In every case they constitute GREAT news. As mainline Protestants, we rarely use the word "evangelism," but in the Greek New Testament, it's a common term. *Euangelizo* means simply to tell somebody some good news. The noun, *euangelion* is routinely translated "gospel." The good news, or the gospel truth, isn't that there is no bad news. The good news is that in the face of bad news there is always the corresponding good news. This, my friends, is good news.

It is no secret how drawn I am to the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk who spent a large portion of his life in exile at the Plum Village Monastery in France. He has published more than 130 books which have sold over five million copies, and gratefully, most are available in English. Lately, I've been spending time with his book of poems from twenty years ago, entitled *Call Me By My True Names*. We recently shared another reading from this volume, and I doubt this one will be the last. Today's reading is appropriately titled "The Good News." What could be better than having a Buddhist monk bring us the gospel today?

He opens this poem by observing that "they" don't publish good news. By "they," he seems to refer to news media, the purveyors of news who, ideally in a free society, are here to keep our government and ourselves honest, and to provide public accountability in the maintenance of democratic norms. But they need to sell newspapers. They need to attract viewers. In many cases they need to sell advertising, or in the case of public news outlets, they must maintain their reason for existence. What does it really say about us that there isn't much of a market for good news in this system? I have a suspicion that there would be more reporting of good news if the public at large were to develop a hunger for it. Instead, we are presented not with a half-empty glass, but a completely empty one. And it has a crack in it. Since, "they" do not publish good news, Thich Nhat Hanh says that the good news is published by *us*. Every present moment is a new special edition, and he says plainly that we need you to read it.

There's a drought, you say, a high-rise collapsed, another heatwave. There's voter suppression, gun violence, and Q-Anon. There's a crisis in housing, in health care, in racial inequity. Our roads and bridges are crumbling, our climate is changing, the sea levels rising. There's cyber-bullying, there are food deserts, there are culture wars, there's a pandemic. Need I go on? No, not really. We are fully blanketed every single day with everything that is wrong. But what about the things that are right?

The good news is that we're alive. The beautiful Bay is still there, and we have eyes to see it. Birds are still singing, and we have ears to hear them. We have family members by blood and by choice, and they're in front of us. "Hugging," says the poet, "is possible." Vaccines are working. More people are conserving water. Cars are getting more efficient. People write poetry and make art. Singers sing and musicians play, friends gather. There are weddings and births and baptisms and deaths—all of the natural transitions in this life and beyond, and we celebrate them, we celebrate each other, we celebrate ourselves.

My chosen field of study has taken me to a place where I look at ancient sacred writings and try to discover them in the context of the world they came from. It's an impossible task, but a noble one, I believe. And though we cannot fully get there, we can approximate an understanding. Most often, I think of what it would have been like to follow a teacher like Jesus around an impoverished countryside, a people and a culture blanketed with bad news. Oppression, poverty, corruption, and disease, making daily life unbearable. And along comes someone who announces good news to the poor, sight to the blind, freedom, forgiveness, and unconditional love, a life-giving flow that feels like cool water on a parched ground. The words themselves are inhabited with an energy that opens the heart and tunes the soul. It may not change the circumstances, but it changes me. It puts me in touch with the half of the glass that is full, while bringing me a peaceful recognition of the half that is empty.

We can be the special edition today. We can be the evangelists of all that is right with the world. If it feels like we're awash in bad news, we can shower each other with good news instead. It's a habit we can in-habit. And that's the gospel truth.

