

“Start with YES!”

Rev. David Gregory

July 24, 2022

7^h Sunday after Pentecost



What Is Your House Built On?
Sandi Hester

Readings

Luke 6:43-47

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

You don't get wormy apples off a healthy tree, nor good apples off a diseased tree. The health of the apple tells the health of the tree. You must begin with your own life-giving lives. It's who you are, not what you say and do, that counts. Your true being brims over into true words and deeds.

Why are you so polite with me, always saying “Yes, sir,” and “That's right, sir,” but never doing a thing I tell you? These words I speak to you are not mere additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundation words, words to build a life on.

Richard Rohr

in *The Universal Christ*

For the planet and for all living beings to move forward, we can rely on nothing less than an inherent original goodness and a universally shared dignity. Only then can we build, because the foundation is strong and is itself good. This is surely what Jesus meant when he told us to “dig and dig deep, and build your house on a rock.”

When you start with a YES (or a positive vision), you more likely proceed with generosity and hope, and you have a much greater chance of ending with an even bigger YES. To try to build on NO is, in the imagery of Jesus, to “build on sand.”

For decades now, this congregation has been known for its non-dogmatic approach to religion and spirituality. It's even a matter of pride among those of you who have been here many years. I'm certainly proud of it. This approach forms the opening line of our covenant, which says in effect that though we may not agree on everything, we do in fact agree to *live out the questions together hand in hand, supporting the fragile, protecting the wounded, giving the angered space and time, dancing with the free, celebrating moments of balance and not fearing the unfolding of imbalance*. Some streams of Christian theology would consider this statement a form of heresy, and if that's the case, then I just want to say how much I love this heresy, how much I enjoy it, how freeing and life-giving it is, and just how much it makes me say YES in a world of NO.

The fever pitch of dualism and binary thinking that seems to have kidnapped our public discourse and our national psyche has to get dialed down a bit if we're going to do any healing of ourselves and our planet. Our confident assertions of certainty often get us into trouble, and they fail to take in the very creative and evolutionary core of who we are, who God is, and the rationale we have for being here on planet earth in the first place.

Some of you might remember John Mabry, a UCC minister who served in the East Bay, and now lives in the Capital Region of New York State. He was here at CCC for a seminar based on his book *Faithful Generations* during Irene's tenure as your interim minister. He has another book called *Heretics, Mystics & Misfits*, based on a series of sermons he delivered here in California. Each chapter highlights a person or a group of people in the history of Christian faith who have been criticized, ostracized, exiled, or occasionally burned at the stake for daring to live out the questions in ways that the religion of empire disapproved: people like Pelagius, Meister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, George Fox, Hegel, Kierkegaard, or Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. I remember reading this book just before I arrived here and relaxing my way into the idea of being a heretic, realizing that in a sense I've always been a heretic whether I could admit it or not. But you get to a certain age where you don't care who knows of your heresy, and it's a lovely place to be.

Thousands of theologians from the fourth century onward have joined in lockstep to decide what is right for everyone, rejecting sacred writings of many genres, insisting that God is only masculine, and that any deviation from that pure masculine character of God amounts to sin that angers "Him." They took this idea of an angry male deity to an extreme that says we're all sinners because we sin all kinds of sins, and more importantly we sin because we're sinners by our very nature, since Adam did the unthinkable by listening to his wife and eating an apple from the wrong tree. The concept of original sin has made it possible for the religion of empire to convince us that we can't live without it, that we must have some sort of mediated settlement with this angry male god, and since the proponents of empire are the experts on who God is, they can show us THE way. Really!?

Most everyone has heard my incessant chatter about our newest grandson, born a month ago today. We will soon pay him a visit, but in the meantime his proud papa texts me a photo every day or two. Every time I stare at that little face, I find myself a little more hopeful about the direction of the world. I do not feel as though I'm looking into the eyes of a sinner who is offensive to God. Instead, my heart opens wide; I feel the energy of "YES" instead of the limitations of "NO." I become even more convinced of "original blessing" embodied before my very eyes, rather than original sin.

Interestingly, we've been sold the myth of certainty, and the idea that we need a "sure foundation," a body of dogma that can never change, and that anything else is built on shifting sand. Richard Rohr in his book *The Universal Christ* argues that the opposite is actually true. He says

We can rely on nothing less than an inherent original goodness and a universally shared dignity. Only then can we build, because the foundation is strong and is itself good.

Jesus said that it's who we are, not what we do or don't do that matters. It's at the core of our being, this essence we call Divine Love that animates everything in the universe—every animal, vegetable and mineral, every human soul. You can't look into the sub-atomic world and find any evil contained in it. People may have done evil things with that sub-atomic energy, but the energy itself is not inherently evil. The same is true of our souls. People twist the idea of Divinity into the

most elaborate contortions to further their own aims, usually having something to do with power or domination, with making some people the “others.” But even then, these folks are not in their essence evil people; they’ve just lost sight of who they really are. They’ve made themselves to be something they’re not, and when you live like that, you’re building your house upon sand. But if you can get to the inherent goodness within the human soul, you find there a foundation to build upon that is as solid as rock. Where you begin determines where you’re going to go and how quickly you can get there.

One of our more famous Congregationalist forebearers, Jonathan Edwards, living in the first half of the 18th century, is noted for his sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Though his delivery was apparently quiet and dry, his words caused people to convulse with guilt, and this sermon became one of the catalysts of the first Great Awakening. Jonathan Edwards in his own way moved people to evolve. This may seem strange to us today, because we ARE in a different stage of evolution. We look at the whole idea of an angry God and find an incongruence with what we can see with our own eyes, and also with what Jesus did and taught. Call it a reformation, call it an awakening, call it anything you want. We’re in a process of rapid change. As John Philip Newell said to us in this very room, “We’re midwives of a new creation.” We aren’t quite sure what is trying to be born, but the labor pains are definitely there. Old paradigms are falling away as new ones come into view. And we just might get to the delivery if we can breathe our way through, *living out the questions together, hand in hand*. If that’s heresy, then bring it on!

