

“You Need Not Call It God”

Rev. David Gregory

October 11, 2020

Pentecost 19



Readings

Philippians 4:8

New Revised Standard Version

Beloved ones, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

From *Just This: Prompts and Practices for Contemplation*

by Richard Rohr

Staying awake comes not from willpower but from a wholehearted surrender to the moment—as it is. If you can be present, you will experience what most of us mean by God, and you do not even need to call it God. It's largely a matter of letting go of resistance to what the moment offers or of clinging to a past moment. It is an acceptance of the full reality of what is right here and now. It will be the task of your whole lifetime.

For decades we have been known to our local community simply as “CCC,” but we are aware that this designation is not very descriptive of who we really are, especially for those of you who are joining us virtually from many miles away. Our church was founded over sixty years ago in covenant with what was then a brand new denomination called the United Church of Christ. The UCC has long been known as a liberal and progressive gathering of people committed to the teachings of Jesus, especially with regard to issues of peace, equality, and social, racial, and economic justice. In our particular congregation, these commitments grow from the very fertile ground of contemplative practices like meditation, centering prayer, mindfulness, sung prayer, yoga and movement practices; and the list goes on. Because of this, we are more likely guided by our *experiences* of God than by our *ideas* of God. We are more concerned with practices than with doctrines. For many of us, the essence of faith is learning to be comfortable with unanswered questions. We find dogma and certainty to be illusive, and not really worth the time it would take to try to convince someone that we are right, only to find out that we ourselves might have been mistaken at some point.

We see in Jesus of Nazareth an historic model for speaking truth to power, for the liberation of oppressed people, and for freedom of conscience for ourselves and others in the practice of our religious and spiritual life. Our denomination is known for its extravagant welcome, and we invite anyone and everyone to the full life and work of the church, without regard for racial, ethnic, or religious background, gender identity or expression, differing ability, age, or any other human condition. We embrace all people, but not all behaviors. Coercion, bullying, and control don't fit with who we are or what we do. We are about equality, mutuality, and respect for the dignity and rights of all sentient beings, as well as for the earth itself. We are lovingly and tenaciously committed to the reversal of the climate disaster that is part of our every day existence here on the west coast. Every smoke-filled day strengthens our resolve to love the earth and to serve its ability to heal itself when given the opportunity.

We also understand that there is a past we cannot change, as well as a future we cannot control, and so we dive deeply into the present moment where all of life is created and all change happens. Any practice which makes us more fully present to this moment will give us a path to peace, love, and security. Regret for the past and worry for the future rob us of that peace, but if our focus is in the present, we actually have the opportunity to create things that are helpful and true.

There is a biblical admonition in the Letter to the Philippians that says "Whatever things are true, honorable, just, pure, and commendable," we should "think about these things." For the better portion of my life, I thought this sentence was a teaching on the power of positive thinking. In a world that feels like a cesspool of troubling news, thinking positively seems like a nice way to clean everything up and get back on the right track. Don't be worried. Don't feel sad. Think on the bright side and everything will be all right. It feels like an exercise in willpower and self-control, as though if I worked hard enough and became more adept at thinking about good things, then "the God of peace would be with me," in the words of the Apostle. But author and teacher Richard Rohr, a founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, gives us a different lens with which to read these words. He says it's not about willpower at all, but a "whole-hearted surrender to the moment—as it is." It's in the letting go of resistance that we find God, and he reminds us that we don't even need to call it God.

If you were to spend much time with us at all, you'd find that God goes by many names in our community, and you're always welcome to describe the indescribable just as the ancients did, in words and metaphors that are tuned to your own understanding and experiences. In Richard Rohr's mind, call it what you will, but the path to discovering it is a single one: surrender to what is present. The very idea of surrender seems counter-intuitive, doesn't it? For most of us who have been shaped by the individualism of western culture, surrender is the waving of the white flag, of giving up and giving in, a sign of weakness that says I have lost the fight. In that way of thinking, being strong means never giving up, never conceding loss, and never letting anyone see you sweat it. But being fully awakened is just the opposite of that. This kind of surrender has nothing to do with defeat, but with a whole-hearted entry into the presence of something we cannot name, cannot quantify, and certainly cannot contain by the simple exercise of our own will. When I really think about it, if the Apostle is asking me to think about things that are true, I will say in response that just because something is true does not mean it is happy or pleasant. What is true is sometimes difficult, at times even painful. But if we can surrender to that pain, even for a moment, if we can drop our resistance to what is, we often find that the pain itself loses something of its bite.

Each Friday we offer a noontime contemplative practice on Zoom that we're happy to share with you. All you need to do is to go to our website, ccctiburion.org, and sign up for our email list, and each week you can receive the invitation. This past Friday we were led by our friend Barbara Buckley in a Tibetan Buddhist practice called "Tonglen," which simply means "giving and taking" or "sending and receiving."

The idea is to take something that could be difficult or painful, and with an in-breath fully receive it—perhaps there's an element of surrender here. On the out-breath she instructed us to practice giving energetically to others who might be experiencing the same pain or difficulty. They could be named or unnamed, known to you or not—it does not matter. I cannot say it was an easy practice, but it was highly effective, at least for me. In staying present to my own pain and fully receiving it and then surrendering to this oneness with others—breathing it again and again—the pain began to subside and I think to heal. I think this is what we mean when we talk about God. This presence. This present to which we surrender and fully feel and fully move through to the other side. As Richard Rohr says, this is the task of our entire lifetime, to fully surrender to the moment. You need not call it God, but you can if you want.

