

The Herding Instinct

Rev. Bill Eichhorn

November 27, 2022

First Sunday in Advent



Readings

John Philip Newell

The Rebirth of God, p. x

What does it mean that we are made *of* God rather than simply *by* God? In part it means that the wisdom of God is deep within us ... the creativity of God is deep within us ... as Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth century Christian mystic says, the love-longings of God are at the heart of our being. We and all things have come forth from the One. Deep within us are holy, natural longings for oneness, primal sacred drives for union.

I John 4:11-12

My dear, dear friends, if God loved us like this, we certainly ought to love each other. No one has seen God, ever. But if we love one another, God dwells deeply within us, and God's love becomes complete in us – perfect love.

That's my buddy Eli, a seven-year-old Shetland Sheep Dog. He looks like a collie, because Scottish shepherds needed a herding dog smaller than the large Rough Collie to herd their flocks on the small Shetland Islands, which are above the Arctic Circle, so to get a smaller herding dog they bred the Rough Collie with the King Charles Spaniel. Eli has that collie-like double coat, striking face and incredibly strong herding instinct. He was bred to be a show dog, but because he was born undersized and couldn't meet the very precise breed standards to be in the show ring, he became my buddy.

How do I know Eli has a strong herding instinct? He's never been around sheep or undergone the training necessary to be a good herding dog. Since he doesn't have a flock to herd, he herds us – Ann, her 12-year-old Yorkie, Siena, and me. When Ann says to the dogs, "Let's go for a walk," Eli twirls around barking and runs through the upstairs, locating Siena and me. He stands at the top of the stairs waiting until we are all there, and then he barks, telling us we should go down the steps. He waits until the three of us have started down, and then he shoots past us, waiting at the bottom of the stairs. Sometimes, however, Ann decides not to go on the daily walk, so I gather up Siena and head down the stairs. Eli is running up and down the hall barking at Ann, urging her to join the pack. When she tells him "no," that she isn't going, he runs back to the top of the stairs and cries a long mournful cry. The pack isn't complete; his herding job isn't finished; he knows three isn't four. He won't stop until Ann comes out,

pats him on the head, and tells him it is okay. Only then will he go off with just Siena and me. I have great admiration and respect for the way Eli is faithful to that herding instinct that is embedded so deep in his Sheltie soul. He wasn't born with an instinct to be a show dog. He was born to round up the flock, to keep them together, to protect them. In his case, we are his flock, and he tends us well.

I'd like to suggest that like Eli, Jesus was a herder. He rounded up men, women, and children, and led them to a hillside above the Sea of Galilee where he preached the Sermon on the Mount, and when the people got hungry he told the disciples to feed them. He herded his disciples into a busy marketplace and told them to watch a woman making bread dough. "See how the leaven gives rise to the dough," he said. That's how the community we are trying to build takes shape. Did you ever notice how Jesus did his preaching and teaching out of doors where he could gather a crowd together? Deep in his soul was this longing, this God-given yearning to bring people together into community where people could be healed by being held in love – by being held by God. "No one has seen God, ever. But if we love one another, God dwells deeply within us, and God's love becomes complete in us." (1 John 4:11-12)

Like Eli and Jesus, we here at CCC have that herding instinct. Deep in the soul of this community is the God-given longing to bring people together in community where love can heal, comfort, support and inspire. Last Sunday, Ann was bringing the 10 o'clock service to a close. Since those in the sanctuary were seated around tables, Ann decided not to ask the congregation to stand and form the usual closing circle. But as we began to sing the closing chant, "Ubi Caritas," a few people stood and began joining hands. Others followed, reaching over and around chairs and tables. Finally, the circle was complete, except for one person who had mobility issues and was inside the circle. Another member, acting on that CCC herding instinct, stepped out of the circle, placed her hand on his shoulder and reached back over her shoulder to connect with the circle.

Barbara Brown Taylor speaks about John Philip Newell, who is regarded by many as one of our most prominent teachers of Celtic Christianity and whose wisdom has expanded our thinking here at CCC:

John Philip Newell possesses three gifts of the Spirit that are too rarely found in the same person. He is able to see the divine wholeness in our fractured reality. He is able to articulate that wholeness so that we can see it too. Finally, he is able to connect his vision to act so that we are able to follow him into the new harmony ...

In nearly all of the books John Philip Newell has written, you will find the words that were one of our readings this morning:

What does it mean that we are made *of* God rather than simply *by* God? In part it means that the wisdom of God is deep within us ... the creativity of God is deep within us ... as Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth century Christian mystic says, the love-longings of God are at the heart of our being. We and all things have come forth from the One. Deep within us are holy, natural longings for oneness, primal sacred drives for union.

Hear it again. "Deep within us are holy, natural longings for oneness, primal sacred drives for union." If we embrace this core belief from Celtic Christianity, then we understand that each one of us has these love-longings in our spiritual DNA. If we are created *of* God rather than *by* God, then that herding instinct, that primal sacred drive for union with others and with the earth, is in every cell of our spiritual makeup.

Has the traditional Christian Church's distorted doctrine of original sin diverted us from this understanding of our spiritual nature? Yes. Do we fail to fully embrace and live this profound truth that we are created of God? Yes, we do. But Advent candles and angels come each year at this time to stir our imaginations and open our hearts once again to the incarnation – the incarnation of God, not only in Jesus' birth, but the incarnation of the One, the Sacred, in each one of us. This understanding leads me to suggest a rewrite of the reading we heard earlier from I John to read:

No one has seen God, ever. But God dwells deeply within each one of us, and by loving one another we make God's love complete in us.

The yearning to complete God's love by loving others is, I believe, our deepest, most primal human longing. At our spiritual core, we are herders, and our life's work, our ministry if you will, is to reach out and bring others into the circle, into the community, into the reality of love.

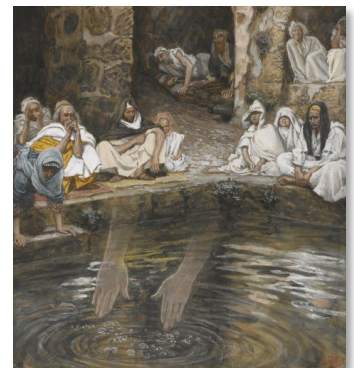
We were all horrified by the tragic results of continuing gun violence in our country this past week. Six murdered at a Virginia Walmart and five killed at the beloved LGBTQ Club Q in Colorado Springs. My friends, if every human being on this planet is created of God, then each and every one of us is sacred. Each and every one of us deserves respect. But instead of growing up in an environment where the Sacred Self of each child is nurtured, too many children grow up in an environment where domestic violence, alcoholism, homophobia, poverty, racism, sexism all conspire to deny children the love and respect they deserve. The result is angry adults who buy in on twisted views of "the other," who feed their resentments with conspiracy theories from the dark web.

Advent and Christmas come to remind us that a light shines in the darkness of these unsettling times. It is, I believe, the light of love. On the day after the tragedy at Club Q, I saw an interview with one of the people who had been shot twice and who gave the interview from his hospital bed. He was clearly uncomfortable and in pain, but he had a message he wanted to convey. The reporter asked him how he felt about the man who did the shooting. He responded:

I don't want to talk about him, but I want everyone to know what a loving family Club Q was and is still today. My family is back in Indiana, but Club Q has been my family for many years. It has been a place people from the LGBTQ community, as well as from the straight community, could gather to celebrate life, to experience love and kindness. It will continue to be a welcoming family.

A light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not, will not, overcome it.

Have you noticed the angel visiting us wears a wristwatch? What do you make of that? What could the artists who created the angel be trying to tell us? Perhaps she wants to remind us that it is time to turn loose our herding instinct, to reach out and touch someone on the shoulder and bring him or her into the circle of love. Who do you know that could use such a touch? Could the angel be asking us as individuals, as a congregation, to be Advent midwives in the rebirth of God, the Sacred, the Holy by living as if we are born of God? I wonder. Does that spoon in the angel's hands stir us to ponder what we need to let go of to prepare the way for new birthing? I wonder.



*The Piscina Probativa
or Pool of Bethesda (detail)*
James Tissot