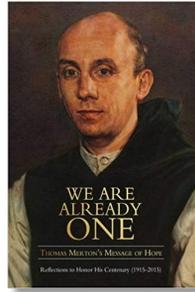


“Let’s Grow Up!”

Rev. David Gregory

March 3, 2019

Transfiguration Sunday



First reading

We Are Already One, an essay by Thomas Merton

I stand among you as one who offers a small message of hope, that first, there are always people who dare to seek on the margin of society, who are not dependent on social acceptance, not dependent on social routine, and prefer a kind of free floating existence under a state of risk. And among these people, if they are faithful to their own calling, to their own vocation and to their own message from God, communication on the deepest level is possible. And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech and beyond concept.

Second reading

Matthew 5:1-11 – New Revised Standard Version
from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Here's another old saying that deserves a second look: “Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.” Is that going to get us anywhere? Here's what I propose: “Don't hit back at all.” If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, gift wrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.

You're familiar with the old written law, “Love your friend,” and its unwritten companion, “Hate your enemy.” I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives his best—the sun to warm and the rain to nourish—to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.

In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you.

In days long ago, before God created GPS, I would go on long road trips with my parents. And while they argued over directions in the front seat, in the back seat I would quietly lay out my maps, and when the moment was right, when it was safe, I'd calmly tell my father where to turn. And once things were going smoothly again, we would go back to counting windmills, or white horses, or see how many different states were represented on the cars that passed us on the highway.

When you're from Ohio you have to make your own fun. And the side benefit of all of that was the ability to notice the details of my surroundings. However it happened, I have a heightened sense of direction. I'm always looking for the milestones, the familiar objects, sights, or scenarios that give me a sense of where I am. And so, you'll hear me mention things like "It's been a year since we bought the car," or "three months ago today we went to see a show." I'm forever locating myself in space and time. I can't help it. I can't stop it. The only times I have ever been truly lost are when I've been using GPS.

And so today I recognize a milestone. Today we begin our second year together in this place, and this afternoon we'll mark this spot, the first Sunday of March, with the signing of a covenant between this congregation, the Golden Gate Association, and me, signifying our accountability to one another. It's how we do it in the United Church of Christ, and though I've been joking about it in the last few weeks, it's actually a solemn and sacred moment—one that I am really thrilled to observe with you. As we move into this second year, we know a great deal more about each other than we did at the beginning. And in a way, I'm glad it took a year to get this installation accomplished, because it recognizes that we are taking deliberate steps together for the long haul.

I feel privileged that during my years of ministry I have served a mixture of settled calls and interim ministries. With interim ministries, you're always looking at the clock and the calendar. You hit the ground running. What does this church need from me? How much can I accomplish in a short period of time? What wounds need to be healed? What needs to change? It's a lot like being called in to clean out someone else's attic and basement, to get out the paint brush and prepare for the next person to move in. In settled ministries like this one, it's far more about the long haul. But other than that, it's kind of the same. You hit the ground running. What does this church need from me? What wounds need to be healed? What needs to change? The clock is still ticking, but you're looking ten years down the road instead of 18 months. It's like a long road trip that takes careful planning and lots of good communication with everyone staying calm as we study the map.

We have a long way to go, but if we're going to get there, we need to be clear about our destination and find the shortest, best route. The Jesus Sayings as presented in what we call the Sermon on the Mount is a kind of road map that can help us do that. Some of the territory we have to navigate is beautiful and fun, and some could be labeled rough terrain. Today's reading takes us through some of those tougher places when it asks us to love our enemies. "Enemy" is a really strong word, and it's probably used here to push the point far past a what could be termed a good suggestion. Jesus simply says "This is something you have to do." Do it now. Do it every time. Do it forever. Impossible.

We shift it to the realm of the impossible, calling it a high ideal to which we might aspire, but it's not realistic to think that we could actually do it. And Jesus probably would not disagree with that. It's highly unlikely that one could spend a decade in a recliner with the remote control, and suddenly jump up one day and run a marathon. The kind of love we are talking about here is a muscle that must be exercised in small increments before it can be fully utilized. And the gym where that exercise happens is called church. You see, it is easy to love those who are easy to love. Love for those who aren't so easy, however, is risky. It requires a certain vulnerability that does not come easily, and a deeper form of communication which Thomas Merton calls "communion." If you want to know what makes church different from a club or civic organization, it's this deep communication or communion which Merton says is wordless, beyond words, beyond speech, and beyond concept. It is why we incorporate silence into our practice. It is why our services cannot be mere pep rallies that excite and motivate us. We must connect with something much deeper in order to be followers of this Jesus we keep talking about.

It has become far too easy for us to call ourselves Christian. In a very real sense, the church has been a place where we reclined week after week and sang songs about how we're going to run the marathon. God help me run the marathon. Give me strength to run the marathon. And as a final benediction, we push the seat back just a little farther. This kind of Christianity will never work. It never has worked. It never will work. It requires a God to swoop down from heaven to do it all for me, and I'm here to tell you, in this space and time, that will never happen. We have work to do together. If this is the school of love, we've hit the gym class, and it can be a bit grueling and we might need to sweat a little.

I knew that the ministry of the Community Congregational Church was going to be hard work. My impression before I arrived was of a unique venture, in a place like no other, with a storied past, an aging building, an aging population in a community that is richer, older, whiter, and less religious than just about anywhere else in the world. How easy does that sound? We are aspiring to do something hard. It won't happen all at once. It will take sustained daily practice, exercising the muscles of forgiveness, forbearance, and most of all love. The aspiration is that we continue in the painful process of birthing something that is new: a new identity for a new generation, a powerful message of good news lived out before a world in desperate need of some good news. It requires of us that we let go of our own comfort and start exercising this very difficult form of love. Little by little, day by day. Keep doing it. Keep doing it. Keep doing it. We'll get there more quickly if we follow the map.