

“Together With the Earth”

Rev. David Gregory

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Psalm 8

Adapted from The Message by Eugene Peterson

Brilliant God, yours is a household name.

*Nursing infants gurgle choruses about you;
toddlers shout the songs that drown out enemy talk and silence foolish babble.*

*I look up at your macro-skies, dark and enormous, your hand-made sky jewelry,
moon and stars mounted in their settings.*

Then I look at my micro-self and wonder, why bother with us?

Why take a second look our way?

Yet we are like gods, bright with Eden's dawn light.

*You have put us in charge of your handcrafted world, given us the care of sheep and cattle,
even animals out in the wild, birds flying and fish swimming,
whales singing in the ocean deeps.*

Brilliance of God, your name echoes in everything.

Reading from The Sacred Universe

by Thomas Berry

What is needed is a new pattern of rapport with the planet. Here we come to the critical transformation needed in the emotional, aesthetic, spiritual and religious orders of life. Only a change that profound in human consciousness can remedy the deep cultural pathology manifest in such destructive behavior. Such change is not possible, however so long as we fail to appreciate the planet that provides us with a world abundant in the volume and variety of food for our nourishment, a world exquisite in supplying beauty of form, sweetness of taste, delicate fragrances for our enjoyment, and exciting challenges for us to overcome with skill and action. The poets and artists can help restore this sense of rapport with the natural world. It is this renewed sense of reciprocity with nature, in all of its complexity and remarkable beauty, that can help provide the psychic and spiritual energies necessary for the work ahead.

Although the quote did not originate with him, John Wesley, who along with his brother Charles led the 18th century movement known as Methodism, often said, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.” It was 59 years ago that a group of people here in Tiburon made contact with the home mission board of a two-year old denomination called the United Church of Christ to discuss the formation of a congregational community in this place. While we may not know exactly what led them in this direction, it is clear that none of the churches in the area offered what this group was looking for. In other words, there must have been something essential to their cause, something they found compelling enough to bring them to the top of Rock Hill to begin this endeavor that we’re still engaged in six decades later.

This past week, I located a box that contains pages from a scrapbook kept by some of the founding members of Community Congregational Church. There are worship bulletins from services held in the local movie theater that reflect the times, traditional prayers written in patriarchal language, and sketches of the cathedral-like sanctuary they hoped to build on this site, including a split-chancel, chambers for organ pipes, and a large window overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge. I’m not sure where all those ideas went, but there is a sense of relief in my soul that those particular plans never materialized. It wasn’t for lack of membership or interest, because in the 60s and 70s there were large numbers of people attending multiple services in this, the structure that they actually did build. For whatever reason, that earlier vision was not included in the essentials of this place – those underlying, unifying ideas, convictions or causes that made CCC what it became, and what it is today.

During this Easter season, we are endeavoring to get in touch with our essentials – those ideas, convictions, or causes that unify us. And this is where it gets a little tricky, for we are not a doctrinal people. We hold our creeds loosely, if at all. The one unifying force is diversity, which for many seems like a paradox.

In many ways, it’s easier for religious groups to adopt some creedal statements as their essentials and then require the membership to subscribe to them. Evangelicals might call these things the “tests of fellowship,” which is one of the cultural reasons a Midwest town with a population of 400 might contain five or so evangelical or fundamentalist churches. Once those essential tests of fellowship become overly-specific, there is a huge potential for strife and division that ensures a lack of unity or oneness. In that setting, unity itself becomes suspect.

Enter the United Church of Christ, also known as the “*Untied* Church of Christ,” or better yet, “Unitarians Considering Christ.” We have taken Wesley’s quote even further to say, “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, diversity; in all things, charity (love).” This brings up an interesting exercise for us on this, the fourth Sunday of Easter in 2018. Just what are our essentials? What are the things that unify us, that bring us together, that keep us coming back here week after week, donating our money, our time, and our energy? These may not be “tests of fellowship,” but they might be things that cause our more conservative friends or family to squirm a little (that is, if they didn’t run screaming from the room).

There is a subtle little rainbow wind-sock that hangs on our building. Your minister has a husband ... and your minister *is* a husband. We celebrate the Spirit in all people, in all things. We have a long history of inviting and honoring the ideas of other traditions and practices, and we shy away from things that identify us as a traditional church. It’s in the DNA of this place, and quite frankly it’s precisely what attracted us here. So we’re exploring now what

holds us together, and so far this season we've seen that we are together in compassion, and together in the light (which includes our shadow). Today, and appropriately so, I would like to suggest that we are together with the Earth. For 48 years there has been a thing called Earth Day, and this is it. We observe it, we make it part of our liturgies, and especially in these days of Pruitt's EPA, it is time to make it a cause once again.

Environmental stewardship has always been a personal cause of mine. You might even call it one of my essentials. As many of you know, I grew up in a Quaker college town of about 10,000 people in southwest Ohio, and though I did not live on a farm, it was in every respect a farming community. All of the cool kids showed their sows or their steers at the county fair, vying for blue ribbons doled out through the 4-H clubs. (If you don't know what a 4-H club is, I'll tell you later.)

Being a "townie" as I was called, participating in a 4-H club was a little difficult since there were zoning regulations that said you couldn't raise a steer in your side yard. Besides, there was that little problem of selling it for slaughter that would have led me to having a herd of cattle in the side yard. So, someone invented 4-H clubs for townies. It was 1968, and I was eleven years old when I became a charter member of the "Nature Nuts," a 4-H club based upon environmentalism or "conservation," as it was then called. As a Nature Nut, I got to climb through gorges looking at rock formations, collecting fossils. I learned to hike the woods and identify trees. We had an annual fishing derby for which I actually won a prize for catching the smallest fish. Enough about the Nature Nuts. This isn't really what makes the care of the earth personal for me. What makes it personal is what has happened to the earth where I come from. It has become unrecognizable in many ways.

The Ohio of my childhood was made up of family farms with diversities of crops and animals. A single farmer would raise chickens, cows, sheep and swine. Crops were rotated and there were fields of alfalfa to be turned under the following season to replenish the soil. As children, we could run barefoot through the corn rows because there was space for the plants and for children, and no toxic chemicals trying to put back what modern farming techniques have robbed from the soil itself. A half-century later the animals have disappeared into massive corporately owned facilities. Family homesteads with houses and barns and outbuildings have been turned into massive seas of cornstalks planted ever closer together to increase yield for cooperatives and corporations who come in with massive machines. The world this Nature Nut grew up in is gone, and the one that remains is weeping. Not only is it weeping, but it is becoming catastrophic. Not only are we exploiting the ground we walk on, and not only are we rendering it unusable by our grandchildren, we are destroying ourselves in the process. And our connection with the ground is not merely physical. It is also metaphysical. It is spiritual, if you will.

We celebrate Spirit in all people, in all things. I know this is not a creedal statement, but it is an identity statement. It is not a test of fellowship, but it expresses who we are. Today we are together in compassion and together in the light. These are our essentials. The earth is also essential.

May it be so.

