

## ***“The Conversation In My Heart”***

Rev. David Gregory

November 18, 2018

Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost



### ***First reading***

*Thirst by Mary Oliver*

*Another morning and I wake with thirst  
for the goodness I do not have. I walk  
out to the pond and all the way God has  
given such beautiful lessons. Oh Lord,  
I was never a quick scholar but sulked  
and hunched over my books past the hour  
and the bell; grant me, in your mercy,  
a little more time. Love for the earth  
and love for you are having such a long  
conversation in my heart. Who knows what  
will finally happen or where I will be sent,  
yet already I have given a great many things  
away, expecting to be told to pack nothing,  
except the prayers which, with this thirst,  
I am slowly learning.*

### ***Second reading***

*Luke 17:11-19 Common English Bible*

*On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten men with skin diseases approached him. Keeping their distance from him, they raised their voices and said, “Jesus, Master, show us mercy!”*

*When Jesus saw them, he said, “Go show yourselves to the priests.” As they left, they were cleansed. One of them, when he saw that he had been healed, returned and praised God with a loud voice. He fell on his face at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. He was a Samaritan. Jesus replied, “Weren’t ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? No one returned to praise God except this foreigner?” then Jesus said to him, “Get up and go. Your faith has healed you.”*

We welcome you to this holiday celebration, a day of joyful feasting, a pause amid the struggles of our neighbors, of our nation, and of our environment, where we are simply grateful. Though our history lessons were often over-simplified, the traditional idea of Pilgrims making it to a time of harvest in a new land can inspire us to follow new dreams of our own, as long as they are tempered by a sense of justice and a common humanity that might have been missing in those earlier times.

Like many of you, I grew up in a time and place where Thanksgiving was all about the food. Year after year, we proved that Quakers were as prone to gluttony as the general population. It was a ritual of family—which was not a bad thing at all, especially before we had to outlaw certain topics at the dinner table. It was a time for bonding, for paying attention to your grandma, stepping in to mash the potatoes, or help dry the dishes. It was all about the turkey coma, snoring in front of the television, then waking to surmount the second in a long line of desserts. Oh, we were thankful, all right. Thankful for all the things we had. Thankful for our homes, our possessions, our opportunities, and our heritage. It wasn't a spiritual practice as much as a bodily ritual. And so we needed the Scriptures to shame us into saying thank you.

The parable of the ten lepers is often read as a lesson in gratitude, but as with every parable, there are layers of meaning that emerge each time they are read. Our focus is often on the nine out of ten people who, having been healed, did not stop to say thank you. But really, this is not something so unusual. It is easy to see that one's euphoria over being set free from disease could overtake a sense of decorum. I can imagine the healed men running and leaping, dancing and embracing in a fit of joy. I think they would have come to their senses and at least sent a thank-you note at some point.

The surface of the story is about gratitude, but the root of it has to do with the one who turned around. He was the Samaritan, the dreaded, sometimes hated "other," the demonized foreigner who was united with the other nine only by their disease. So I'm less concerned about the other nine saying *thank you* than I am about their attitude toward the outsider. Were they simply going back to their earlier sense of superiority now that the disease was no longer their common denominator?

Thanksgiving, I guess, is not about a simple thank you. As we read last week from Diana Butler Bass, it isn't about the warm feelings we gain by enumerating what we have. It is not about congratulating ourselves for being who we are, for being where we are, and having what we have. I mean, here we are, living in one of the most breathtakingly beautiful areas of the world, and all of it temporarily obscured in a toxic cloud, while our neighbors try to pick up the pieces of lives that will never be the same. The losses of structures and landscape are tragic. The loss of human life is staggering and incomprehensible. Whether we like it or not, circumstances force us to go deeper. How can we bring deeper meaning to this moment than the celebration of our successful excess?

We can begin, like Mary Oliver, and awaken each day with a thirst for the goodness we do not have, becoming slow learners of mercy, taught by the beautiful lessons on the way to the pond. Her prayer is nothing more than a conversation in her heart between her greatest loves: her love for the earth, and her love for the divine. This conversation moves her to divest of her things, one by one, for she may be invited one day to go, without packing a single thing. How often we see that invitation as a reality in the lives of those around us! We never know what a day may bring forth, and so as we awaken to this day of feasting, the most important thing is to pay attention to the conversation in our hearts. Only you can say what that conversation is. And the only way you can recognize it is to listen. The only way you can listen, is if you become quiet. And the only quiet in your life right now is the quiet that you choose. The only way we can choose it is by practice.

Thanksgiving, in this context, can never be a celebration of our superiority as God's chosen ones, who have somehow through divine Providence displaced enough indigenous people to create a new land of our own, as if we were the first to discover it. If that sounds harsh and un-American I apologize ... sort of. Like the Pharisee who stood in the temple and loudly thanked God that he was not like other people, we have been tainted by our own myth of exceptionalism that tells us that we are somehow more blessed, more privileged, more worthy than others.

As we learned last week, gratitude is all about holding all things with open hands, freely receiving, freely giving. Thursday at Stone Soup, I learned that there was going to be a collection of clothing and shoes taking place at Blackie's Pasture that afternoon. It was an extremely busy day, but I texted Tripp to set out some things he could donate, and when I had a moment I stopped at home and collected some of my own things and made my way down to the parking lot at Blackie's Pasture. I had no idea who to look for. There were others there with bags of clothing all looking a bit confused. After a while, a U-Haul truck pulled in. I expected that it was being driven by a total stranger, until out from the driver's seat popped our very own Sig-Britt Ivey. I remember feeling this rush of grateful energy, as people ran over to her, smiling and hugging, joyfully sharing whatever they could out of love for people we don't know, but to whom we are radically and unalterably connected.

We call them synchronicities, and there are so many of them around this place it has almost become ridiculous. But it's not ridiculous at all. The synchronicities are just an expression of the weaving together of this human tapestry, and today in our corner of this tapestry, they're about the sharing of a common meal – everyone contributing, everyone being fed, everyone being clothed and sheltered, being treated to human dignity and worth, respected, loved, invited, accepted, included, and applauded. All of this is a result of the attention we give to the conversation going on in our hearts, between our love for the earth and our love for the divine. Out of that conversation grows everything we do in this world. Like Mary Oliver, we'll eventually get this lesson as long as we make our frequent trips to the pond.

Amen.