

“A Far Better Way”

Rev. David Gregory

January 23, 2022

3rd Sunday after Epiphany



Readings

1 Corinthians 12:25-26, 31

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

The way God designed our bodies is a model for understanding our lives together as a church: every part dependent on every other part, the parts we mention and the parts we don't, the parts we see and the parts we don't. If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance And yet some of you keep competing for so-called "important" parts. But now I want to lay out a far better way for you.

"Afterwards"

Lynn Ungar

in her collection *These Days: Poetry of the Pandemic Age*

She told her granddaughter the whole
harrowing story, glossing over nothing.
Not just the lives lost, and the jobs,
but also how it seemed like
the world went dim
when they lost dancing and singing,
when the theaters and stadiums
and concert halls closed down,
when the school playgrounds went silent.
*We never forgot, she assured the girl,
what a hug feels like.
We never stopped wanting that.
But Grandma, the girl asked, how
did you do it? How did you make it through?
It wasn't easy, the woman replied.
But at some point we decided
we were more attached to living
than to our old ideas about
the way things were supposed to be.*

It is a feature of the pandemic era that we now have the words “pandemic era” in our lexicon. Two years ago, we were thinking we’d be locking down for a couple of months. Maybe by Easter things would ease. Surely by the summer solstice we’d be dining out again—definitely by the time school starts, and if not, then certainly before the holidays. We kept thinking we were on the brink, that the conclusion of this thing was right around the corner. Then came vaccines, which at first felt like the parting of the Red Sea. Alpha, delta, omicron, cloth masks, surgical masks, N95s, KN95s, booster shots, cancellations of concerts and shows.

The isolation we have felt, and in some cases are still feeling, is real. The great question of this time has been “How do we maintain our distance without isolating?” How do we maintain our sense of connected community when the maintenance of distance is in and of itself an expression of love for neighbor? How does an institutional community, like a church for example, stay relevant and alive? How does it maintain its health and well-being when so much of what we used to be and do is unavailable to us? As we begin a third year of this journey, the expectation is that by summer we will have seen this latest wave subside, that we will have some hope of moving from pandemic to endemic, and that once again we’ll shop and dine and sing and hug, that we’ll gather in large groups for concerts and seminars and sermons, and that we’ll drop our masks, reach out our arms, and open ourselves to the vulnerability of living in community.

If you were to ask me which “C” in “CCC” best describes us, I would say it is, by far, the word “Community” which holds prominence. It’s been that way—not quite from the beginning, but almost so. I think it’s why we’re more comfortable using the insider code language “CCC,” as opposed to “Congregational Church.” Congregationalism has long historic antecedents going all the way back to the Puritans of the seventeenth century. The word “church” takes us back to at least the fourth century, maybe the second century, bringing the baggage of its evolution to our doorstep, making us feel the urge to explain ourselves to the world around us, compulsively educating everyone about all the things that we’re NOT, so as to adequately distance ourselves from certain repugnant things that are done in the many names of the Church.

Yes, we’re a church, but not like *that*. Yes, I’m a Christian, if I can tell you what that means. Yes, I still get up on Sunday mornings and gather habitually because it means something to me. It brings me hope. It lets me know I’m not alone in this world. More than anything we are community of spiritual seekers without a single common dogma. That is abundantly clear. A dogmatic person would look at us and ask “Why are you still here? How can you exist after sixty years without a unified doctrine expressed in a list with checkmarks? What is your sense of identity?” The answers to those questions take us right back to the beginning of this message and the word “community.”

Our recent lectionary readings from the first letter to the Corinthians have been highlighting this meaning. Western culture, religious and otherwise, seems addicted to the myth of individuality, even though science, the earth and its creatures, many spiritual traditions and scriptures of many kinds, all show us otherwise. It really does take a village ... for everything. The human body is a perfect example of unity in diversity. Like our bodies, we as a community are comprised of different parts with different roles and different gifts, and the bottom line is that we really do need each other in order to function in a healthy way.

There has not been a time in recent memory when we've needed each other more than now. In the current era, we speak easily of our weariness, our losses, and our many disappointments. Sometimes we awaken in the night possessed by our fears, drowning in our uncertainties, second guessing our choices from the day before. Never before in our lifetimes have we had to navigate anything close to "the" pandemic, but we should remember that even though this one is new, the experience of it is not.

I grew up steeped in stories of the influenza pandemic of the early twentieth century, thanks to an eloquent grandmother who talked a lot. As her little grandson, I was oddly addicted to her telling of those stories. "What was it like?" I'd say to her. What was it like to have her fiancé stuck in an army camp in 1918, where twelve hundred soldiers died of the flu. Did she think he'd live to see the wedding that waited in boxes in the closet, ready to happen at a moment's notice if he survived?

I first encountered Lynn Ungar's poem "Afterwards" on Parker Palmer's Facebook page, and found it stunning, even though at first I really didn't know why. Part of its strong appeal was the fact that it told a story that separated us from our current dilemmas by a generation or two. How delicious it is to have all these dilemmas relegated to history as told to a child who had never had to stay home from school or daycare just to stay healthy! But as I read the poem more deeply, I realized that the child in the poem was *me*. "Grandma, how did you do it?" I'm pretty sure I uttered those words to Esther Starbuck while sitting on the front porch on a hot summer afternoon, as her stories of the 1918 pandemic were tucked into all the other stories, like when she pointed to the corner and recounted seeing the first automobile she'd ever seen, or how our house was one of the first in the county to be wired for electricity or to have an indoor bathroom.

Lynn Ungar is a Unitarian minister and my latest poetic addiction, and sometimes I wonder if maybe she had a grandma something like mine. "How did you live through it?" The little girl asks. "How did you make it through?" In other words, how did you maintain your connection to humanity when things kept closing down? How did you survive without the warmth of a hug? How did you live when the choirs stopped singing? How did you stay in community when everyone was so isolated? "At some point we decided we were more attached to living than to our old ideas about the way things were supposed to be," was her grandmother's wise reply.

Like that wise grandmother, in a collective way we are called upon today to pool our many gifts, to tenaciously cling to community, to let go of our expectations, to surrender our requirements for a happy life. You see, there is a far better way to live than the one we used to think we had to have. We're rediscovering it, and it's called "love."

*Love is patient; love is kind;
love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends.*