

“Moving Forward”

Rev. David Gregory

February 2, 2020

Epiphany 4



First reading

Ephesians 4:6-7, 11-15

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Everything you are and think and do is permeated with Oneness. But that doesn't mean you should all look and speak and act the same. Out of the generosity of Christ, each of us is given his own gift.

He handed out gifts above and below, filled heaven with his gifts, filled earth with his gifts. He handed out gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher to train Christ's followers in skilled servant work, working within Christ's body, the church, until we're all moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God's Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ.

No prolonged infancies among us, please. We'll not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are an easy mark for impostors. God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love.

Second reading

from *A Potential CCC Vision Statement*

Community Congregational Church is a place where anyone wrestling with the BIG questions of life can belong with others in loving multi-generational community. We will offer a wide range of programs and practices designed both to expand and to embody contemplative spirituality, artful co-creation, and grounded actions toward peace and justice for our environment and for all of humanity.

Wow. It is good to be back. This is an understatement. On Thursday morning, it was 15 degrees when I stepped out of the house where I was staying, got into my rental car which was parked against a waist-high snowbank, and drove to the Rochester airport. This the kind of cold that goes right to the core of your being. It's an assault on the body. It hurts. And when I landed in San Francisco it was 62 degrees. Wow. It is good to be back.

As we sat on the tarmac at Rochester, I looked out at the snowy scene, and remembered a morning almost two years ago when Tripp and I boarded a plane at JFK with little else but our pets, and flew out here to begin this brand-new phase of our lives with all of you here in Marin County. We felt a strong pull to be here, the kind of pull that you can't stop even if you wanted to. And, of course, we didn't want to.

I have been invited to spend some time tomorrow afternoon with members of the search team, those responsible for calling me to this position. For those of you who were not here at the time, the team was co-chaired by Lois Karpenko and Carolyn Long, who I now can see were representative of the groups that we affectionately call the "7:30 people" and the "10:00 people." They were joined by Jolyn O'Hare, Bob Doyle, Heather Hughes, and Carol Saysette. During the last 36 years, I have served nine churches, three of which were interim or short-term positions, and one as an ordained elder. This church is my fifth "settled" pastoral position, meaning we are in covenant together until I decide to leave or you decide that I should go. So, I have been in the "search and call" process five times. Of all of those processes, this one was by far the wisest, most thorough, most Spirit-led.

In post-modern churches of our lineage—that being the mainline-Protestant-reformed tradition—pastoral searches have become [match.com](https://www.match.com) on steroids, and the current technology made it possible to work on this together from opposite coasts. And I feel like the results have been worth it. Over the last two years, much has been accomplished. Thirteen new people have been added to the official membership; attendance is stable (another way of saying that we're not shrinking). That might not sound too exciting until you take into account that most churches *are* shrinking. New programs have been introduced, including book study, spiritual practices, meditations, yoga, the blessing of the animals, and mobile office hours, to name just a few. There is rarely a Sunday that the 10:00 service is without a brand-new face, and if you haven't noticed, many of those faces are a bit more youthful than before. Longstanding programs like Taize and Stone Soup are enjoying a noticeable upsurge. The choir has bucketsful of new energy, and has drawn new people to its ranks and to our gatherings. The healing circle continues to be the heartbeat of the church.

There have been changes to our physical plant, like an entirely new roof. Two of our three office spaces have been redone (hang on, Joanne!). Rest rooms have been repainted. We have all new chairs for our gathering spaces. We will soon have solar panels, and hopefully new paint and flooring in the sanctuary and new flooring in the seminar room. We are served by some new personnel. We changed groundskeepers, and with the added hard work of our Sacred Space Team, the landscape around here has never looked better. We have a delightful new custodian, Cesar, who does magnificent work, and in case you're not aware of that, just check out the polished door knobs. And we have added a Director of Programming, Jennifer Stone, who is breathing new life and energy into everything we do. Together, we have worked very hard to get to this present moment, to the experience of a much more solid foundation on which we can plant ourselves and become grounded, settled, and focused. It feels good; it feels right; and we can be rightly proud of what has been accomplished. And now, it is time to move forward.

Moving forward requires much more than a solid foundation. It requires vision—not just any vision, but a single, focused vision, one that has been missing, or at least a little elusive. You did a lot of work on a vision statement during the interim period before I arrived, but we didn't quite get it over the

finish line, and that's just fine, because apparently we weren't ready. Now, I think we are, and to that end I want to say three things: First, the Community Congregational Church, United Church of Christ of Belvedere-Tiburon (that's our official name) is and always has been a place of multiple spiritual lineages. Our major roots may not seem evident to you, but they are firmly planted in the Protestant and reformed mainline. And I personally have some roots here. If you want to talk about what that means, I'll be happy to do some teaching to clarify it, but it requires more time and concentration than we have today.

There are other lineages represented here. The Human Potential Movement was big here in this part of the world during the 60s, 70s, and into the 80s. It took Maslow's theories of self-actualization and made them experiential through the work of, among others, the Esalen Institute, greatly influencing the fields of psychology, philosophy, and spirituality. Some of you are part of CCC through this lineage. The retreat I attended in the Catskills last weekend is from this same lineage. I have some roots in this lineage. There is also a well-defined Buddhist lineage here. Some of you have attended sangha here on Friday mornings for many years. Mindfulness is less about religion and more about practice, and I personally have some roots in this lineage. There is a contemplative lineage here that feels strangely Quaker to me. It also has connections with Catholic and Anglican practice, and I definitely have roots in this contemplative lineage. There is a lineage called Celtic Spirituality that is well-represented here, and I have some roots in this lineage. There are some who identify as agnostic or atheistic—the "what's it all about, Alfie?" crowd, and depending on the day or the mood I can have some roots here. There is a lineage of being spiritual, but not religious. There are times when I find myself here. There is a long tradition of Social Justice for humanity and for the environment here, and I have roots in this lineage. We express our co-creative energy in the arts, in music, in poetry, in the visual artwork that adorns the walls of our public spaces. I have roots in this lineage. These multiple lineages obviously attracted me here. This is the only church I've served that has such a wide range. It makes us unique in this world, and if our social media presence can begin to highlight that, others will be drawn here too.

This leads me to our purpose, which I will address more fully next Sunday, but let me summarize it by saying we are here because we are needed in the present world. Our presence brings more than information, more than relationship, more than community, it brings healing. And the world has never needed our healing presence more than it does today.

And finally, our vision. This I will speak to more fully the Sunday after next, but here is a *possible* statement of our vision. It is not official; it is not complete; it may work, and it may not. Who knows, but here goes:

*The Community Congregational Church is a place where anyone wrestling with the **BIG questions of life** can belong in loving, multi-generational community. We will offer a wide range of practices and programs designed both to expand and to embody contemplative spirituality, artful co-creation, and grounded actions toward peace and justice for our environment and for all of humanity. We will be a healing presence in the world.*

If there is a way that we can begin to coalesce around a statement like this one, and if we can begin to push our roots deeper, if we can grow our limbs taller and more lush, we will arrive at a new day with new life and energy to move us forward.

In his book, *The Rebirthing of God*, John Philip Newell has said unequivocally that the walls of Western Christianity are in a state of collapse. He says that there are three main responses to that collapse: We can deny that it is happening. We can frantically shore up the foundations of the old thing. Or, we can ask what is trying to be born that requires a radical reorientation of our vision.

I say for year three together, LET'S GET RADICAL!

