“Opening Our Treasures”
Rev. David Gregory
February 3, 2019
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

First reading
Sweet Darkness by David Whyte

When your eyes are tired
the world is tired also.

When your vision has gone
no part of the world can find you.

Time to go into the dark
where the night has eyes
to recognize its own.

There you can be sure
you are not beyond love.

The dark will be your womb
tonight.

The night will give you a horizon
further than you can see.

You must learn one thing.
The world was made to be free in.

Give up all the other worlds
except the one to which you belong.

Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet
confinement of youraloneness
to learn

anything or anyone
that does not bring you alive

is too small for you.
Second reading  
John Philip Newell in Christ of the Celts

Never before has humanity been more aware of the oneness of the earth, even though that awareness is being opposed by some of the world’s mightiest political and religious forces. The growing consciousness is that life is interwoven, that reality is a web of interrelated influences, and that what we do to a part we do to the whole. So who is Christ for us now? What is it we are to bring from the great treasure of our Christian household to the awareness and longings that are stirring within the human soul today?

As many of you know, this week I was at The Bishop’s Ranch near Healdsburg attending the School of Celtic Consciousness. Each year, this congregation provides me with some time and resources dedicated to continuing education. It is also something I am required to do in order to maintain my professional credentials as an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ. Beyond that, it’s just a really good idea, because if I ever ceased to evolve in my spiritual life and practice, there wouldn’t be much value in these little talks I give each week. It’s one of the reasons that I can never bring myself to recycle one of the hundreds of sermons I have meticulously stored in the cloud. To rid myself of those texts seems a little like cutting off an appendage, so every week they get stored somewhere. But as I’ve told you before, I’m not the same person I was last week, let alone ten or twenty or even thirty years ago. And this church is not the same community it was a year ago, ten years ago, or fifty years ago. The Community Congregational Church has its own continuing education, its own evolution, and if we do the work we are called to do, and if we do it diligently, fifty years from now there will be an evolved version of CCC in place, not as a monument of a past that we are now living, but as a means of bringing the transcendent into the lives and spirits of people yet to be born, in a way that inspires them to co-creation and humanness, respect for the earth, and peaceful solutions to human problems. In order to do that work we need to dig up the buried treasures of our own tradition and express them in a way that has meaning not only to us, but to those who look at this thing we call “Christianity” and go, “Huh?”

My friend Carol Saysette handed me a book last summer by Ken Wilber, one of the great Integral thinkers and philosophers of our day. It is a book of biblical proportions (I’m sure it weighs more than my biggest Bible). I see it as a compendium of Wilber’s life’s work, which I see as his desire for humanity to evolve from its piecemeal approach to understanding life to a more cohesive way of looking at reality. The book is entitled The Religion of Tomorrow, and in it Wilber makes a distinction between mystical spiritual experience and theological understandings of belief. He says

... scholars of the mystical, or esoteric, or inner teachings of the world’s Great Traditions are fairly unanimous in saying that although the outer teachings of each tradition are considerably different, often even contradictory, the inner esoteric teachings, the teachings based not on beliefs but on direct spiritual experiences …. show a remarkable similarity in what they say, which is why the mystics of virtually all the world’s religions have great ease in understanding each other, even as their exoteric brethren argue themselves silly.
In other words, when you hear me speak of the New Reformation, as I like to call it, I am not talking about a repackaging of the Christian household to try hook in a few youngsters to carry our ideas of western Christianity forward. I’m talking about a reformation that encompasses the practice of all religious traditions, where the unity of all things is not just an ecumenical exercise in everyone getting along and playing nice. It is a meeting place for all humanity, and whether we recognize or not, it’s really happening. And we are here for the birth pangs, so to speak. If our times seem difficult to navigate, and if we seem theologically, socially, or politically confused, know that we are only at the hint of a dawn of a new day, a day in which the sun will one day rise high in the sky to give those who come after us some great light. It is in this quest, I believe, that John Philip Newell asks us, “What is it we are to bring from the great treasure of our Christian household to the awarenesses and longings that are stirring within the human soul today?

We are still first and foremost the Community Congregational Church. As such, we are part of what we might call the “big C” church, the church universal, an expression of some form of teaching based in the sayings of Jesus of Nazareth. Being part of that church gives us a unique voice, for sure, but the value of our membership in that church isn’t in how we can be the best church that we can be, but in what we bring to the table we call humanity. What are the buried treasures in this thing we call Christianity, that we can bring in a meaningful way to the spiritual life of all humanity? And what is our reason for existence as a church if it is not to join others at this table we call life, and share our own bounty with others who also share theirs? I believe this is where the Celtic consciousness meets western Christianity and performs a much-needed mouth to mouth resuscitation. As I have been attempting to teach over the last year, there is no single thing called Christianity, just as there is no single Islam, no single Judaism. There are nuanced versions and sects of all traditions which, though they carry the same overall designation, could not be more different if they tried. Once again, if I am to designate myself a Christian, you’re going to have to allow me to tell you what I mean by that.

Mr. Newell used a phrase this week that has given me some bright sunshine. It’s not necessarily a new thought for me, and maybe it was the Scottish accent that really brought it home for me, but he referenced what he calls “fourth century imperial Christianity,” the kind that unfortunately has formed the basis of almost all of what the world thinks of when we use the word “Christianity.” It’s not that the religion embraced by Constantine and codified by patriarchal church councils wasn’t Christianity. It’s just that they nearly succeeded in making it the only form of Christianity to survive. It’s why people were labeled heretics and burned at the stake. It’s why writings and expressions of the divine feminine were expunged. It’s why the women who figured prominently in the Jewish sect we think of as early Christianity nearly vanished without a trace. It’s why there were things called the Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, and even the Moral Majority. It’s why the Equal Rights Amendment was never ratified, and it’s why old men in Washington are terrified of a contingent of diverse young women who have joined them on Capitol Hill.

There are some treasures, you see, that got buried, quite literally buried, in a cave in Qumran, unearthed starting in the late 1940s, which began to show us that there were other pieces of the Christian household that had been long suppressed. There are ancient forms of Christianity that
grew from roots other than from Constantine. When you hear us speak of Celtic Christianity or Celtic Consciousness, we are speaking of one of those buried treasures that has been quietly unearthed over centuries. It may not be as easily identified or understood as a creedal statement or a list of doctrines. By its very nature it resists that. It rests not in the concept of “original sin” as conceived by St. Augustine. It rests in what Matthew Fox has called “original blessing.”

Does your soul not come alive, does your heart center not expand when you are told that at your very human core you are good and holy and beloved, that in the masculine and feminine, in the light and the shadow, the yin and the yang, you are exactly as you were meant to be, with all the creative powers of Imago Dei? Do you not feel a sense of awe and love when you are conscious of the earth beneath you, when you watch an ocean wave, or smell a fragrant flower, or see a waterfowl doing what it does in the sunshine. Are you not drawn to the oneness of all things? Are you not overcome with the oneness of all humanity when you see children separated from their families at the border, and feel compelled to reunite them? Do you not feel the joy and excitement of the young people whose art is displayed on our walls, or the despair of families in the Canal whose landlords are pushing them out with exorbitant rent increases? Are you not one with them?

These impulses, these knowings, these practices are part of a new wave of ancient ideas that lie buried like treasures, waiting for us to unearth them. In the quest to find the Jesus we can truly follow, Celtic thought can become one of our greatest contemporary teachers. This is my journey right now, and I’d just love it if you’d think about coming along.