

“Our Desired Future”

Rev. David Gregory

February 16, 2020

Epiphany 6



First reading

from *Upstream*, a collection of essays

by Mary Oliver

I stood willingly and gladly in the characters of everything—other people, trees, clouds. And this is what I learned, that the world’s otherness is antidote to confusion—that standing within this otherness—the beauty and the mystery of the world, out in the fields or deep inside books—can re-dignify the worst-stung heart.

Second reading

from *The Rebirthing of God*

by John Philip Newell

Humanity’s great wisdom traditions are given not to compete with each other but to complete each other. We need each other as much as the species of the earth need one another to be whole. Rebirthing will happen within our Christian household when we reverently approach the heart of other traditions.

In these last days I have been quite taken with the twin processes of birth and death, and their many similar qualities. As our family remains in a state of vigil, it has seemed clear for days now that my sister’s journey is ending. There is so little that is keeping her alive at this point, and the only thing clear to us in this moment is that this process is just that— a process. As with labor and delivery, you have the sensation that it is imminent, but there is no explanation for exactly what makes it happen in space and time. We long for the resolution of an inexplicably long struggle, for the release from a terrible disease, a disease that remains such a mystery in the world. Over the last week my only solace has been found in long walks. I walk because I cannot sit still. Moving my body makes me feel like I’m doing something in a situation where there is little or nothing to be done. There are no lessons to be learned, no explanations to be made, and no logic to this very liminal space in which we’re living. It is yet another “threshold,” a threshold that is life itself. There is but one choice to be made and that is to remain in it.

This is a difficult time, but it is also a time that is very rich in Spirit. It is a time to notice things, to feel connected in the universe, to experience a collective consciousness. It is a thin place where the veil between heaven and earth is more transparent than ever. And I'm thinking that what is true for me personally may also describe what is happening to us collectively, as we navigate uncertain and confusing times. It is this uncertainty and confusion that leads us to the big existential questions, the kinds of questions that bring us here into this community where we live the questions together hand in hand.

If you've been around this place at all over the last couple of years, and especially in the last few weeks, you know we've been talking a lot about vision. Vision, as I said last week, answers the questions *What is our desired future? What do we wish to become? What is our identity in the Christian household, or for that matter, in the world?* I am here today to say that answering these questions need not feel confusing to us. We need not make it into something difficult, when actually it is very easy. We need not take the words of Jesus and spin them into some theological riddle, when their simplicity calls us to respond in ways that we instinctively know to be true. We're here to love our Creator—our Source—with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and to love and care for our neighbors in the same way that we care for ourselves. That's all it is.

There's nothing like the thresholds of birth and death to clear everything away except what is vitally important. It's like a great wind that blows away the chaff leaving only the weighty pieces of grain for our useful consideration. This week I was drawn to an essay by Mary Oliver. We're right to be enamored with her poetry, but her essays are no less beautiful and important. She says:

*I stood willingly and gladly in the characters of everything—other people, trees, clouds.
And this is what I learned, that the world's otherness is antidote to confusion—that
standing within this otherness—the beauty and the mystery of the world, out in the fields
or deep inside books—can re-dignify the worst-stung heart.*

We're living in a world where "otherness" is made to be suspect, where we are encouraged to trust only what is like "us." We're building walls instead of bridges; we're more concerned with protecting our own identity than with enjoying the great beauty of "otherness." Mary Oliver refers to this otherness as the mystery of the world, out in the fields or deep inside books.

The strength of life and humanity is in its diversity, in its rich tapestry of "otherness." We were never meant for homogeneity. Oneness was never meant as a gathering together of sameness. Unity was never meant as unanimity. Church was never meant as a place of uniformity, not as long as there are people in it, anyway. This exciting experiment that we call the Community Congregational Church has never been a place of sameness, at least not for a very long time.

From what I can surmise, there was a period in the first eight years or so, where the original founders tried to create a rather traditional church up here on the hill. Looking at a worship bulletin from that time period, you might not feel as drawn to the church as you are today. It portrays an *ecclesia* with a limited scope. And from what I read, it nearly came to naught. By the mid 1960s the place was near foreclosure. The reason we are here today is that CCC found itself a new calling in the crazy Marin of that era. And that calling involved the embrace of "otherness." It became a variegated weaving of many ideas, the study of many traditions, and a place where these multiple lineages we keep talking about

were honored and respected. It was also a time of explosive growth. People were hungry for it, and guess what, they still are. It is no surprise then, when a Scottish preacher and purveyor of Celtic consciousness, John Philip Newell, says in his book *The Rebirthing of God* that

Humanity's great wisdom traditions are given not to compete with each other but to complete each other. We need each other as much as the species of the earth need one another to be whole. Rebirthing will happen within our Christian household when we reverently approach the heart of other traditions.

I'll be honest with you and say that when we sold everything and left our lives and our family behind to come out here two years ago, we did it with a sense of calling. In the current situation, we are feeling the cost of that calling. I do not say that to gain your sympathy. I simply want you to grasp the seriousness and the gravity of what is happening here and now. We're not here to play around with the latest marketing plan. We're not here to resurrect some past success and put a post-modern face on it. It's not about the perfect program, or the best music, or the slickest packaging that we can come up with. The rebirthing of this very household will happen when we reverently approach the heart of other traditions as well as our own, when we stand in this world's otherness as an antidote to confusion.

It will happen when I can say that I am a better Christian for my Buddhist practice, when I can say I am more like Jesus when I meditate with the Sufis. It will happen when I can immerse myself in the spirit of Taize chant and ground myself in the practice of yoga. It will happen when I can quiet myself enough to recognize the threshold of the present moment and mine whatever gold is there for me, wherever it comes from. This is my desired future, to find the Jesus I've been searching for all of my life, instead of the one that somebody else tried to create for me. As with the twin processes of birth and death, we know when it's imminent, when it's time to push, when it's time to let go. I hope you'll join me on this great adventure of imminent birth.



Birthing the Light
Joyce Huntington