

“A Good Long Look in the Mirror”

Rev. David Gregory

February 27, 2022

Transfiguration



Triple Self-Portrait (detail)
Norman Rockwell

Readings

2 Corinthians 3:17-4:1

adapted from the New Revised Standard Version

Now God is Spirit, and where the Spirit is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of God as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one Spirit to Another; for this comes from the Spirit. Since it is by mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.

Parker J. Palmer

in his book, *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity, and Getting Old*

When I confess my complicity, I am focused on being white in a society rooted in white supremacy. I'm not on a guilt trip here, just acknowledging the inner roots of a social pathology that, if it goes unconfessed and unaddressed, will make people who are like me a continuing part of the problem. No disease in the United States is more in need of a cure than racism—which breeds irrational fears that, in turn, breed the worst of political evils. As long as I draw breath, I want to be part of the solution. That requires a close examination of my own heart and dealing with whatever pathogens I find there. If I want to help heal the world, I must heal myself.

Here we are again. It's one of those moments when the momentum of world events carries us to a different place from where we had planned to go. Our familiar rhythms are interrupted. Each year in this season of Lengthening, we fix our gaze on our individual faith journeys. It seems natural to gravitate to spiritual disciplines, to contemplation, to meditation, and to prayer, and if there were ever a time to pursue a living, vital prayer life, it is now. This week as we begin a new Lenten experience, however, it feels as though it is much more of a communal practice than before. This is a moment for pulling ourselves together, for energizing each other. From an environment fractionated by pandemic, we come to a moment now where we are called into collective wisdom.

We could all see it coming, this war that has commenced in eastern Europe. It has ignited a whole new sense of fear and alarm, and has shaken the order of things in ways we have not seen since the 1940s. And far beyond the brazen violation of one sovereign nation by another, this war brings us to the core question of what it means to be human. To find that out, we really do need each other. In essence, this is what the Community Congregational Church is all about. In times of struggle, in times of joy, in times of happiness or fear, in expressions of bright light or shifting shadow, we are first and foremost a community, a collective energy from which we all draw strength and courage. And if we want to see a model of strength and courage today, it is embodied in the people of Ukraine, and in their leader who refused an invitation to flee so that he could stay in this collective energy. Mr. Zelensky knows that were he to leave, the people of his country would be much more likely to lose heart. And if we learned anything at all the last time there was major war in Europe, we learned of the power of collective resolve expressed by leaders who are realistic but unflinching.

This is a moment for our own collective resolve, a time to ask ourselves what really matters to us. What does it mean to be human in a world like the one we're witnessing today? What pieces of our own tradition are the non-negotiables that keep us connected to one another and to whatever it is that we consider divine? Those of us who place ourselves in the Christian household point to the teachings of Jesus as one of many templates for answering that core question. We are taught: Love your Source, your Creator, with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself. Treat others the way you wish to be treated.

It is not love for neighbor that has created this terrible conflict; it is a love of power. And not merely that, but a desire to dominate others in ways that are derisive and demeaning. It is the power of disinformation and the push to get us to disbelieve those things we can see with our own eyes. It is the ideology of control, of brutal patriarchy, aided and abetted at times (I'm afraid) by those who identify themselves as the church. And because of that association, the first thing we need to reach for is a mirror. In the ancient words of the early church, we see the glory of God reflected in ourselves and one another, as if we're using a looking glass to see what's really there. And in seeing the divinity that's there, we are transformed and healed, and ultimately able to transform and heal the world.

The month of February highlights African American history, and as most of you know, I am often moved by the words and work of Parker Palmer, an author and educator, a Quaker activist who weaves together the poets, the artists, and the preachers of this world. In his 2019 book *On the Brink of Everything: Grace, Gravity, and Getting Old*, Palmer asks us to do something that is very difficult. He suggests that we hold a mirror to our social pathologies, and having seen them, to address them and confess them. He reminds us that racism is a disease that breeds irrational fears and political evils. Racism is an expression of a larger culture of "othering," a breeding of distrust of anything or anyone that is different from us, an archetypal darkness that can find its way into the core of every living soul.

The truth is, Vladimir Putin expresses this darkness in ways that are chillingly reminiscent of despotic leaders in the past. He is bent on the revival of the Soviet Empire, but unlike the Soviets, he invites a religious base, and it is this marriage of church and state that makes the situation so very dangerous. The danger exists not only in another part of the world, but in our own part of the world. The same authoritarian structures are trying to express themselves here where we live, and we have to decide what to do about it. The American experiment is in need of a good, long look in the mirror.

The church in America needs a good, long look in the mirror. Perhaps our own local church does as well. And as Parker Palmer says, if we want to heal the world we must heal ourselves. The power of love is infinitely greater than the love of power, but the path to it is found not in a far-off battlefield, but within the human heart. If we are to heal the world, we need to start by taking our own good, long look in the mirror.

As we begin to peer into that mirror, I share with you John O'Donohue's "Blessing for Courage," from his book *To Bless The Space Between Us*.

When the light around you lessens
And your thoughts darken until
Your body feels fear turn
Cold as a stone inside,

When you find yourself bereft
Of any belief in yourself
And all you unknowingly
Leaned on has fallen,

When one voice commands
Your whole heart,
And it is raven dark,

Steady yourself and see
That it is your own thinking
That darkens your world,

Search and you will find
A diamond-thought of light,

Know that you are not alone
And that this darkness has purpose;
Gradually it will school your eye
To find the one gift your life requires
Hidden within this night-corner.

Invoke the learning
Of every suffering
You have suffered.

Close your eyes.
Gather all the kindling
About your heart
To create one spark.
That is all you need
To nourish the flame
That will cleanse the dark
Of its weight of festered fear.

A new confidence will come alive
To urge you toward higher ground
Where your imagination
Will learn to engage the difficulty
As its most rewarding threshold!



Hello Darkness My Old Friend
Jeanie Tomanek