

“The Spiritual Practice of Social Distancing”

Rev. David Gregory

March 15, 2020

Lent 3



First reading

from *Six Recognitions of the Lord*

by Mary Oliver

I know a lot of fancy words.
I tear them from my heart and my tongue.
Then I pray.

Second reading

from *Dancing Standing Still: Healing the World from a Place of Prayer* by Richard Rohr

You cannot grow in the integrative dance of action and contemplation without a strong tolerance for ambiguity, an ability to allow, forgive, and contain a certain degree of anxiety, and a willingness to not know—and not even need to know. This ever widens and deepens your perspective. This is how you allow and encounter Mystery and move into the contemplative zone.

Here we are at the third Sunday in Lent, and it feels like we should begin this season all over again. It is a different world from the one we inhabited seven days ago.

When last we saw each other, we were refraining from our typical handshakes and hugs and the joining of hands in our closing circle. There was a lot of bowing and nodding and “namastes” in their place. It felt a little strange, but it seemed like we could make it work. In the days since, we have become aware that those measures are not nearly enough to fight the spread of the Coronavirus, and like so many other faith and spiritual communities, we have made the difficult decision to close our building to in-person gatherings.

The overwhelming majority of our spiritual community are in a higher risk bracket, so love of self and neighbor requires that we take drastic actions. I always felt that if it turned out we were overreacting, it would be just fine. But from what I’m seeing and hearing from across the world, “social distancing” seems to be helping.

At the beginning, we said that this would be for a period of two weeks, but it is clear now that we just don't know how long this situation will go on. So, there is a new muscle we need to exercise, one that may not immediately feel good to us. It is the muscle that enables us to tolerate ambiguity, or as Richard Rohr says, to "live in the not-knowing." He says that this is what widens and deepens our perspective, allowing us to encounter Mystery.

I would love to be able say that I am a shining example of strong faith and firm resolve, but to be honest, I've been just as fearful as the next guy. I've had to let go of the memorial service that we were planning for my sister. Her church is closed for the next thirty days, and it really makes no sense for us to travel by plane right now anyway. I've been in the checkout lines at Trader Joe's gripping my cart with the wet wipes, sanitizing after entering my PIN number, mindful of every sneeze or cough that could otherwise be ignored as normal. If I were to get to the source of my fear, I'd have to say it is in the "not knowing." Assumptions we were making just a few short days ago are proving to be false, and the discomfort of that reality drives me just a little crazy sometimes.

So today—in these moments—we have some choices to make. We can succumb to our paralyzing fears, or we can go to a place that is deeper than where those fears reside. And we can turn this thing that we call "social distancing" into a spiritual practice that actually takes us deeper into Mystery and contemplation. As I mentioned in the Friday email, my mother often greeted bad news with a wistful rendering of her favorite altruisms. "Every cloud has a silver lining," she would say as we rolled our eyes and heaved some sighs. Her cheerful positivity rarely rubbed off on me, and I never really accepted the words themselves. My thought at the time was, "That's just the thing Mom says when she wants us to feel better." But now that the CDC has pronounced me "elderly," I might just be onto something that I should have known all along. Maybe my mother knew what she was talking about.

If there is a silver lining in this cloud it is that many of us have some time on our hands—time to meditate, time to think, time to read, time to listen. Instead of rushing from place to place, we're thinking more about staying in one place. Yes, it is all about avoiding a nasty virus, but it can be so much more than that. While in the comfort of our own homes we can practice yoga on the living room rug, and while we're stretching our bodies we can also stretch our souls. We can grow in our tolerance for ambiguity, we can strengthen the muscle that flexes our ability to allow, forgive, and even contain our own anxieties. We can build up our willingness to not know. What if we came out on the other side of this as a more deeply contemplative people than when it began? And what if our view of the world were to become less fearful because of it?

Our parents and grandparents lived through fearful times, world wars, depressions, assassinations, riots and struggles for civil rights. Right now it's our turn. We can go much, much farther now, that is, if we can go deeper. If we focus on our fears, all we're really doing is attracting more of the same. Let's see if we can find the silver lining instead, and in the process get to a brand new place.

"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." These words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt could not be more timely, or comforting, or helpful. They were spoken powerfully into a moment of societal upheaval, and they represented a shift in energy, one that carried generations of people forward for decades to come.

We are in need of another shift in energy. This time it won't come from an inspiring leader who is outside of ourselves. This time it will come from within, from the inspiration of who we are, and we'll find that inspiration by taking ourselves into this beautiful "dance of action and contemplation." It's a dance we are sure to enjoy.