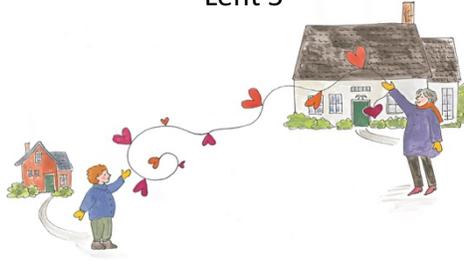


## ***“Everything is Welcome”***

Rev. David Gregory

March 29, 2020

Lent 5



### **First reading**

*Psalm 4:7-8, New Revised Standard Version*

There are many who say, “O that we might see some good!  
Let the light of your face shine on us!”  
You have put gladness in my heart  
more than when their grain and wine abound.  
I will both lie down and sleep in peace;  
for You alone make me lie down in safety.

### **Second reading**

from a recent blog post by Francis Weller,  
author of *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*

How do we navigate this tidal surge of uncertainty? Our first move could be to re-imagine social distancing as an experience of sanctuary and solitude, and not one of isolation. Social distance is a cold term, lacking any sense of the rich invitation that awaits us when we turn toward our internal worlds. Solitude is a state of hospitality, a welcoming of all that is in need of attention. Solitude offers a ground that is embracing and inclusive. Everything can be made welcome in the broad arms of solitude, even fear. For as long as humans have sought counsel with the sacred, much of it has happened in a space set apart from others. Here, in silence and a nourishing aloneness, we can become receptive to the influence of soul.

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How are you today? We don’t usually ask this question because we really want to know. It’s often a rather casual, even mindless way of saying hello. But today I really mean it. How are you today? How are you feeling about the experience of your life in this moment? What are the unexpected gifts and what are the steepest challenges of your current reality? You might be considering the supplies you need to find today in order to remain sheltered in place. You might be facing the loss of income from a lay-off, or worried about a devalued retirement account. You might be homeschooling a child or grandchild. You might feel isolated from family or even trapped in your family. Or, you might just have a new appreciation for trees or sunshine. There are as many feelings today as there are moments in a day, and the very best thing we can do in any given moment is to be honest and clear about how we feel. No feeling, whether positive or negative, needs to be changed or fixed. It just needs to be felt.

As we often say it, the only way past it is through it. And this is why I am once again attracted to the songs of the Hebrew poets, like in today's reading, where the psalmist exclaims, "O that we might see some good!" Have you been feeling that way too? The book of Psalms can—at any given moment—comfort us, disturb us, encourage us, or terrify us. As often as we try to look at these sacred writings theologically, and figure out all the God-stuff behind them, like any songbook, they are really just a repository of emotions—the good, the bad, and the ugly ones. These emotions are expressed by the ancient peoples, but they are our emotions too.

Earlier this week I was forwarded a blog post written by Francis Weller, author of one of the greatest resources for those who grieve, a book entitled *On the Wild Edge of Sorrow*. In the context of our current global crisis, he asks the question, "How do we navigate this tidal surge of uncertainty?" For a couple of weeks now, I've been asking the question, "How can I plan for the future, when I don't even know what might happen tomorrow?" The answer to almost every question right now is "I don't know. It depends."

Here in the San Francisco Bay, we were among the earliest to shelter in place. And if you are in one of those places across the country governed by similar orders, you know that there is a definite period of adjustment to this way of living. The first adjustment is to the geographic slowdown. Being the minister of a congregation that is more regional than local, any given work-week finds me traveling the whole of Marin county, making visits, engaging with people in coffee shops, hiking trails, or other venues. Most of what I do depends on the time of day, the volume of traffic, and the stationary elements of my calendar, like when I need to be at the church for a meeting, an event, or a program. If my car could speak to me, it would say, "Don't you love me anymore?" I have used it once in the last ten days.

While the pace of life has slowed for some, it has only increased for others. There are people on the front lines of the medical field who are not slowing down at all. In fact they are on high alert, often in a place of high risk to their own health in order to care for others. And we honor them. And even for those sheltering in place, slowing down is certainly not a given. Parents and grandparents who live with school-age children are suddenly faced with schooling at home, or no access to daycare facilities. And we honor their dilemma. There are those who are caring for ailing loved ones at home, some who are in hospice care. People suffering from cancer or dementia or all of the other diseases still need the same exact care that they did before. Their loved ones are by their side, and we honor their loving commitment.

There are many around us—immigrants, hourly workers, service workers—who may have some temporary protection from eviction, thanks to the quick work of our partners like the Marin Organizing Committee. But when the crisis has passed, how will they be able to catch up? Many are living in fear of losing their homes. We honor their questions and their anxiety.

We can speak warmly about the gifts of this time for those of us fortunate enough to be able to enjoy them, but we should not forget that most of the world is suffering right now, and the suffering is happening next door to us, across the street from us, all around us and across our nation. Which brings us right back to Weller's original question. *How do we navigate this tidal surge of uncertainty?* To that question I might add my own. *How do those of us who are healthy and at home with time on our hands advocate for those who are experiencing truly existential threats?* In a sense, we all face the existential threat, but how can we be of service to those who are closer to the edge than we are? I think "hospitality" is the answer to the question.

How, you might ask, do we express hospitality in a time of physical distancing? It's not like we can invite others into our homes for a dinner or dessert with some polite conversation. Weller says that our new solitude *is* a "state of hospitality, a welcoming of all that is in need of attention. Solitude offers a ground that is embracing and inclusive. Everything can be made welcome in the broad arms of solitude, even fear."

I wrote this week in my own blog post about a huge "aha" moment that happened for me this past Thursday. As many of you are aware, our weekly discussion group called Stone Soup has doubled in attendance since we moved it to a Zoom conference in the last two weeks. We're starting to see people who live far away joining us and engaging in conversation. Under normal circumstances the group meets at a time that is friendly to retirees, but not really to anyone else. We at Community Congregational Church often speak of how we need "younger" voices in our mix, and lament that they do not seem interested, all the while making it impossible for them to participate.

So, the world is in a state of crisis. People are losing jobs. People are sick. People are dying. For days on end—from the comfort of my home—I have been asking myself the question, "What can I do today, from where I am, with what I have, to create ways to maintain our church?" I ask that question because pastoral ministry is one of my callings, and one of my joys. But now that we can sense that we're still here, that we're still connected and related in all kinds of meaningful ways, it's time go further with it.

What can I do, from where I am, with what I have, to advocate for the homeless? What can I do, right from where I am to help a young family struggling to cope with the crushing weight of child-care, education, and even basic needs during this time? What can I do, from where I am, to help provide desperately needed medical supplies? Or to keep track of elderly neighbors or acquaintances? What can I do in service to humanity from my home? If you have a telephone, you can help. If you have a computer you can help. If you have a healthy bank account you can help.

I invite you in the coming days to sit down at your computer and think about the people, places, and things that tug on your heart. Think about the greatest needs, and then pick one that you can do something about. Write an email. Send a note. Send money. Write your legislators to encourage greater action. Connect with our partner organizations or denominational websites. Talk with people, pray with people, encourage people. As Jennifer Stone reminded us on Thursday, we can exist in a place of physical distance and social solidarity all at the same time. There are a million ways that solidarity can be expressed. Pick one of them once a day and do something. This is the moment where we can really be the change we wish to see in the world. Let's not waste a moment of this crisis, as we employ every corner of cyberspace in the service of one another.