

## “Together In Silence”

Rev. David Gregory

April 29, 2018

Fifth Sunday of Easter



### **First reading**

from *New Seeds of Contemplation*  
by Thomas Merton

*Contemplation is life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness, and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent, and infinitely abundant Source.*

### **Second reading**

*1 Kings 19:11-13*  
(New Revised Standard Bible)

*God said (to Elijah) “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.”*

*Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.*

*When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”*

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We are discovering during this Easter season what it means to be together. This is essentially an extension of the vision work you were doing before I arrived, and it centers on the questions: *Who are we—together? Why are we here—together? What is our mission—together? What shall we do—together—to accomplish that mission? What are the resources, the doors of opportunity that we will go through—together?* This morning I would like to suggest that the answers to these questions are neither difficult nor elusive. In fact, if we take the time and become fully present to them, they are self-evident.

So far we have seen that we share a deep sense of compassion for people and for the earth. We see and hear the people around us, as well as the earth beneath us, and the world around us. We have strong sensations around their vulnerabilities and we reach out—together. This is who we are. We seek to live in and to radiate light, the force of life itself, knowing that life is both light and shadow. We do not ignore the shadow in favor of light, but we honor the presence of both. In this way we live forthrightly, honestly, and truthfully—together.

Today I would like to suggest another core value and practice we seem to share, and that is silence. Here at the top of Rock Hill we are a deeply contemplative people, and this is not by accident. It is in our DNA, and above and beyond anything else, it is the contemplative spirit of this place that drew me here like a moth to a flame.

Many of us are familiar with the story of Elijah, the prophet with a target on his back, having fled from Ahab and Jezebel into the wilderness. He is hiding in a cave. His strength is gone, and he is ready to give up, even though his cause is a righteous one. In a fit of ego, he blurts out to God that he is the only righteous person left, the only one who cares. God tells him at that point to go to the opening of the cave because He is about to pass by. Elijah does as he is told, and standing there he experiences a series of natural disasters: a tornado tears apart everything in sight, and God wasn't there. A strong earthquake shook the earth, and God wasn't there. A huge fire, and God wasn't there. And then the sound of sheer silence (one translation rendered it "a gentle whisper").

When I say that Community Congregational Church is a contemplative place, what I really mean is that we are the church of the gentle whisper. We are not a gathering of left-brained theology wonks. We don't argue the nuances of creedal statements. The reason we honor many spiritual paths, the reason we celebrate the Spirit in all people, in all things, is that together we listen to the gentle whisper.

We've all been in a room at one time or another with a colleague or relative or maybe a politician on the TV screen when we've felt prompted to say, "Please, just stop talking." The television we can turn off; the colleague or relative might be a little trickier. But the trickiest one of all to turn off is *me*. There are moments when I am alone in a room, but my brain will simply not stop talking. Mental processes, calendars, lists, things to do, books to read, people to call, dirty laundry, empty gas tanks, the latest news, regrets from the past, worries about the future, worries about children and grandchildren, financial concerns, injustice in the world, disaster relief. The list never ends, because the brain is capable of storing huge amounts of data. To this brain in my head, I simply have to say, "Please stop talking." It does not happen easily; it takes practice. This is the work of contemplation. It's not an escape hatch. It's not a fad. It's not just a psychological process. It's a spiritual experience, a practice that takes me deeper and deeper into that cave where the gentle whisper happens, and when I exit I am a different person from the one who entered.

This is nothing new. Mystics in every religious and spiritual tradition have always known that there is more to life than what can be experienced through the five senses. Long before prayer devolved into approved liturgies delivered by rote, it was the communal experience of the Desert Mothers and Fathers – ancient peoples and tribes whose lives were more connected than ours – who found ways and methods for quieting the mind and plugging into source. Beginning in the middle of the

twentieth century, here in the United States we saw a surge in the practices associated with Eastern religions as well as Native American spirituality. I believe this was an expression of a hunger and thirst that could never be satisfied by what I call our “neck-up” theology.

Many of us grew up in a time when societal structures seemed to be crumbling. Simply stated, we were looking for something more. It took a twentieth century Trappist Monk by the name of Thomas Merton, along with others like Thomas Keating, to awaken those of a Christian persuasion to contemplative spiritual practice. They did not invent contemplative Christianity, but they played a large role in awakening people to its presence.

My own awakening began over a decade ago when I was introduced to Holy Cross Monastery, run by a hospitable and loving group of Episcopal Benedictine monks along the Hudson River. At the same time, a Presbyterian colleague invited me into his mindfulness practice and introduced me to the writings of Thich Nhat Hanh. I went into spiritual direction with a woman who is a vowed solitary living in the Catskill mountains. And then I was trained as a spiritual director by several people, including Don Bisson, who is not only a Marist Brother, but an educator and a Jungian psychologist. When I want to know what contemplation is, I return to Don’s instructions, and I share them briefly with you:

Contemplation is not any single experience; it is a way of life. It is not driven by an individual insight, but rather a slow, steady awakening to a new way of being. The goal is wakefulness.

Contemplation is not a self-absorbed search for “bliss,” but a conscious embrace of self and other. It risks being authentic both in joy and in suffering, in pleasure and in pain.

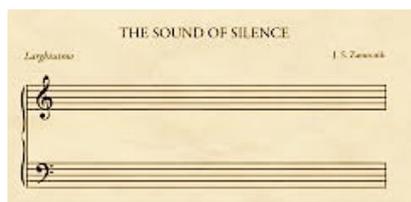
Contemplation is not an escape from our humanity, our problems, or our shadows. It is an intimate discovery of Divine Presence within our humanity.

Contemplation is a process of deep self-awareness, an uncovering of your true identity which has long been buried in the depths of the unconscious mind.

Contemplation seeks the intimacy of Divine Presence in the present moment, clearing blockages from the unconscious mind for an authentic encounter with God/Spirit/Light.

Contemplation moves us beyond our personal point of view and supersedes ego, enabling us to become observers of both ourselves and of the Divine Vision.

Here at CCC, these are the things we seem to be after: wakefulness, presence and vision. There is a vision that is ours, one that we gather by consensus. This is helpful to guide us as an organization. There is another vision that we gather by contemplation, and this is the vision that guides us as an organism. There is a togetherness that comes to us in our agreements and covenants together. And



there is a togetherness that comes from digging our own wells more deeply and tapping into the same Source, those streams of water that give us life. There is a togetherness that comes from the sound of sheer silence. And this silence is the only place we can answer to the question, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Amen