

“Fearless Oneness”

Rev. David Gregory

May 2, 2021

Easter 5



Readings

1 John 4:18-21

from the New Revised Standard Version

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

From *The Wings of Joy*

by Sri Chinmoy

Love is a pure and radiant flame. When we follow the path of love, we find our spiritual life, our inner life, most fulfilling. Nothing can be greater than love. Love is life, and life itself is spontaneous nectar and delight. If love means possessing someone or something, then that is not real love; that is not pure love. If love means giving and becoming one with everything, with humanity and Divinity, then that is real love.

People often say to me that the Community Congregational Church (“CCC”) in Tiburon is a unique place, and I agree. One aspect of that uniqueness is the physical and geographic location, a place that is unusually sacred and strikingly beautiful. If you have never seen it, you owe it to yourself to spend some time there, taking in the magnificent bay views, finding a spot to meditate, or walking the labyrinth. But amazing as it is, the physical space does not compare with the unique gathering of people that make up this community. We often say that “the church is not a building,” and theoretically we’ve always known this to be true. But during the last year, we’ve had an opportunity to prove that point.

At no other time in history have we been more reliant on the fact that “the church is people.” We’ve had to find new ways to “be the church” without any identification with the building, and for most of us this has proven to be an important and valuable exercise, something that will forever change the way we look at this community and our place within it. For one thing, we have gathered people with us who will remain physically removed even when the church doors are reopened. It is not

uncommon in our virtual gatherings to see people from at least five different states in multiple time zones. Some of these folks were members of the church who have moved away and would like to remain active with us. Others have been introduced to us by friends or family members or have seen us on Facebook or YouTube. Perhaps they subscribed to our email list and have joined our Zoom gatherings or small group activities. Whatever the reasons, the unique character of CCC is what often calls people to join us.

Most of us at one time or another have wished for a place to experience Christian faith without dogma, exploration without judgment, or questions without answers. We've looked for reasons not to abandon our faith, to stay connected with some form of Christian tradition while rejecting the harsh exclusivity that prevails in much of what we call The Church. Sometimes our friends, acquaintances, or even family members wonder why we'd even bother with church when there are so many other places to find meaningful community, to join with people of like mind, or to support causes that are important to us. Why have a church? Why have this church? Why does it matter? Some of us have even gone so far as to question our own use of the word "God." The source of that questioning could be the difficult experiences we've had in church, the impossible standards by which we've been judged, or by the pat answers we've heard to complex questions that our own minds tell us are not that easy.

Several years ago, a popular preacher by the name of Rob Bell published a book entitled *What We Talk About When We Talk About God*. Like many, he came from a conservative theological background, but over the course of his ministry he began to ask honest questions without needing to answer them, not quickly at least. His process has led to numbers of books being published, but this one was rather seminal for my own thinking.

When questioned about my view of sacred writings, I've often said that they exist because people from antiquity to the present day have sought to describe the transcendent in words that can be understood. What we know as the Hebrew and Christian scriptures are prime examples of that, and Rob Bell says it this way:

When we talk about God we're using language, language that employs a vast array of words and phrases and forms to describe a reality that is fundamentally beyond words and phrases and forms.

There are limits to certainty because God, it's repeated again and again, is spirit. And spirit has no shape or form. Spirit, Jesus said, is like the wind. It comes and goes and blows where it pleases.

Words and images point us to God; they help us understand the divine, but they are not God.

I have been a student of theology in one way or another for all of my adult life, and I can tell you that as a discipline, I've never found clarity or simplicity to be among its values. In answer to Rob Bell's question, "What do we mean when we talk about God?," the theologian creates a system to interpret what is seen in scripture and what is seen in life—one that attempts to explain it to us. It's not a bad thing to try to do, but unfortunately it's just been done badly over time.

Interestingly, the biblical writers themselves were just taking stabs at the same thing, describing the indescribable. And in the tradition that grew up around the Apostle John, it is spoken simply this way: “God is love. Love is God,” which means to me that there can be no understanding, no experience, no relationship to the Sacred apart from love, for they are one and the same. Love is not just an emotion or an action; it is Being itself. And while we might like to dissect that statement, it really can’t be done.

In the first letter of John, found toward the end of the New Testament, we read that there is no fear in love. We love because we have first been loved, and if we claim that we love this “God” who is Love, and do not love others, that just does not connect in any way. It’s not just that it violates a system; it’s just impossible. At an existential level, God is Love, and Love is the oneness of all things. It is simple and indescribable at the same time, and therefore it is something we *become* rather than something we describe. The late Indian teacher Sri Chinmoy said it this way:

Love is a pure and radiant flame. When we follow the path of love, we find our spiritual life, our inner life, most fulfilling. Nothing can be greater than love. Love is life, and life itself is spontaneous nectar and delight. If love means possessing someone or something, then that is not real love; that is not pure love. If love means giving and becoming one with everything, with humanity and Divinity, then that is real love.

Most people in my vocation are, in a 21st Century post-COVID sort of way, trying to sort out the place of the Christian church, not only within American culture, but in our individual lives. Where do we fit? Where do we belong? Do we have a voice? Is it relevant? Does it have a future? I may not know the answers to those questions, but I can certainly return again and again to the purity and simplicity of Love, which is in its very essence fearless.

Our church Covenant says it like this:

. . . to live out the questions together hand in hand, supporting the fragile, protecting the wounded, giving the angered space and time, dancing with the free, celebrating moments of balance and not fearing the unfolding of imbalance . . .

If that is not an expression of real love, I don’t know what is.

What makes us uniquely CCC is the wisdom and maturity of this covenant we have made with one another. This wisdom does not live in the words themselves, but in the vulnerability that they engender. We are in a time of design and discernment as we make our way toward a new day for this congregation. Whether you are near or far, if you’re hearing these words, you’re a vital part of it. Out of the many, let us be fearlessly One.