

“An Open Hand”

Rev. David Gregory

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Easter 7



Readings

John 17:10-11

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Everything mine is yours, and yours mine,
And my life is on display in them.
For I'm no longer going to be visible in the world;
They'll continue in the world
While I return to you.

Holy One, guard them as they pursue this life
That you conferred as a gift through me,
So they can be one heart and mind
As we are one heart and mind.

Trust, a poem

by Thomas R. Smith in *Healing the Divide: Poems of Kindness and Connection*

It's like so many other things in life
to which you must say no or yes.
So you take your car to the new mechanic.
Sometimes the best thing to do is trust.

The package left with the disreputable-looking
clerk, the check gulped by the night deposit,
the envelope passed by dozens of strangers—
all show up at their intended destinations.
The theft that could have happened doesn't.
Wind finally gets where it was going
through snowy trees, and the river, even
when frozen, arrives at the right place.

And sometimes you sense how faithfully your life
is delivered, even though you can't read the address.

It is the Greek philosopher Heraclitus who is credited with the idea that “the only constant is change,” or as he put it, “You cannot step twice into the same river.” 2500 years later, we have taken this idea and turned it into a trite phrase, as we bemoan our struggle with all that is uncertain. The human brain enjoys its well-worn neural pathways, and this is actually a good thing. Early in life we learn that a hot stove can burn our skin, a fact we can count on without having to think about it. There are certain physical laws in the universe that can be taken for granted, but apart from this handful of unchangeable things, the world we live in is ever and always in state of flux.

As much as we might resist it, nothing much stays the same. If we ever doubted this, then the past year has become our teacher, cajoling us into a new relationship with change, helping us adjust to its acceleration. Often, the lessons have come to us in the form of state or county guidelines, new pronouncements from the Centers for Disease Control, or signs at the grocery store to help us navigate what we can or cannot safely do, based upon what we know today. Tomorrow it could change, but for now, this is the best science.

It's no one's fault. We're finding our way through a maze of information on a virus we knew very little about, within a pandemic we could never predict, reaching for outcomes we wanted to control, but simply couldn't. Should I go to a restaurant? Should I get on an airplane? Should I attend church or go to a party? Should I hug my loved ones? These are things we took for granted that now we must think about, and this is only one way in which our world has changed. It is bewildering to the soul, this not-knowing if and when we can trust what we see and hear.

On this final Sunday of the Easter season, we pay one more visit to some bewildered souls on that agonizing night of communal anxiety, of betrayal and arrest. “I am leaving this world, and they are staying behind,” Jesus said as he was praying in Gethsemane. It was a world in flux, the city filled with visitors for the Passover, the Romans looking for any spark of insurrection that could ignite the tinder-dry hordes of Jewish peasants who might form riotous mobs that they would have to crush into silence. One small band of women and men had been following a remarkable young rabbi who taught with authority and exercised unusual powers of healing. This group, fueled by a messianic adrenalin rush were now passed out from exhaustion in the quietness of the garden as their teacher prayed out loud, “I am leaving this world, and they are going to remain. Let them be as one heart and soul in the same way that we are.”

It would be nice if we could say that they lived happily ever after, but their state of flux would only increase. Within a few short hours there would be a trial, an execution and burial, followed by the discovery of an empty tomb. In the years to come they would face persecution and exile, and in thirty-five to forty years the Romans would crush them entirely, destroying their land, their culture, and their hope for the future. And we are here today to learn from their teacher, through the lenses of many centuries of change, as the river keeps flowing, and we keep looking for it to stay still, or at least slow down. At some point we must come to the end of ourselves, admitting our helplessness and releasing our attachments to specific outcomes. We need to breathe through our inability to control our destinies, and find a place of joy in the embrace of the constant change that is life itself.

Fifteen months ago, we were confronted with a moment of intense change. Without access to our church building, and barred from physical gatherings, we had to think fast about the continuation of our community, which meant taking ourselves into an online presence that we had previously thought to be optional and perhaps unnecessary. Recently I visited my own blog at deeperstreams.com, which has remained fallow over the last year or two. I had every intention of reviving it last year at the beginning of the lockdown. I told myself I would have more time on my hands, which shows how little I really knew. At any rate, here is an excerpt from my last post on March 27, 2020.

We have a serious blind spot. We have been slow to embrace change. We have expressed a disdain for technology as if it were unspiritual or undignified, and yet in this time when we can ONLY gather virtually, we suddenly hear the voices that have been missing. If we are wise, this will teach us something essential.

Suddenly, we found ourselves joined by a previously unknown part of our church community. Some were former members who had moved away and wanted to remain involved in the congregation and could not . . . until now. Others were friends and family members who joined us to see what we were doing. Then there were the completely new faces joining a Zoom or two and finding us to be the place they were looking for but could not find elsewhere. These were the voices that were missing among us, until now, and whether they know it or not, they have something essential to say to us, which is, "You cannot step twice into the same river."

As we find our passageway beyond the pandemic, we have some big changes to navigate. The river has not stopped flowing, and this is a really good thing, but we must remember that change itself can make us anxious. The familiar neural pathways long to fire and wire in all the ways that we expect, and it perplexes us when they don't seem to anymore. It can disillusion and disappoint us.

In my sixty-four years I have lived in seven states. In most of those states I have lived in multiple places. I once counted the residential moves I have made, and the number was too embarrassing to admit in public. There are places I have lived and churches I have served where I now struggle to remember the names that go with the faces in my memory. Once in a great while I would go back and revisit them, especially those places that I had enjoyed, and a piece of me would wonder what it would be like to go back and make it my home. The only problem was that their rivers had continued to flow as well, and they had lived entire lives without me. They had continued to evolve like I had continued to evolve. "You cannot go back," is the phrase that comes to me now.

Right now, we long to go back to a form of life that existed for us eighteen months ago, but the river we're stepping into now is a different one. The shoreline is familiar, but the water has changed entirely. This is where Thomas Smith's poem says it best.

*It's like so many other things in life
to which you must say no or yes.
So you take your car to the new mechanic.
Sometimes the best thing to do is trust.*

For me, it's more like opening my hand and letting an important letter fall into the mailbox. I trust it will get there. My hope is that we can hold this community called CCC with an open hand, and trust that in this new and interesting world, we will still get there.