

“What Is Yet To Be Imagined”

Rev. David Gregory

May 19, 2019

Fifth Sunday of Easter



First reading

Acts 11:1-17 adapted from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

The news traveled fast and in no time the leaders and friends back in Jerusalem heard that the non-Jewish “outsiders” were now “in.” When Peter got back to Jerusalem, some of his old associates called him on the carpet: What do you think you’re doing rubbing shoulders with that crowd, eating what is prohibited and ruining our good name?”

So Peter, starting from the beginning, laid it out for them step-by-step: “Recently I was in the town of Joppa praying. I fell into a trance and saw a vision: Something like a huge blanket, lowered by ropes at its four corners, came down out of heaven and settled on the ground in front of me. Milling around on the blanket were farm animals, wild animals, reptiles, birds—you name it, it was there. Fascinated, I took it all in. Then I heard a voice: ‘Go to it, Peter—kill and eat.’ I said, ‘Oh, no, Master I’ve never so much as tasted food that wasn’t kosher.’ The voice spoke again: ‘If God says it’s okay, it’s okay.’ This happened three times, and then the blanket was pulled back up into the sky.

Just then three men showed up at the house where I was staying, sent from Caesarea to get me. The Spirit told me to go with them, no questions asked. So I went with them, I and six friends, to the man who had sent for me. He told us how he had seen an angel right in his own house, real as his next-door neighbor, saying ‘Send to Joppa and get Simon, the one they call Peter. He’ll tell you something that will save your life—in fact, you and everyone you care for.’ So I started in, talking. Before I’d spoken half a dozen sentences, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as he did on us the first time. I remembered Jesus’ words: ‘John baptized with water; you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ So I ask you: If God gave the same exact gift to them as to us, how could I object to God?”

Second reading

“Working Together” from *The house of Belonging* by David Whyte

We shape our self to fit this world
and by the world are shaped again.
The visible and the invisible
working together in common cause,
to produce the miraculous.
I am thinking of the way the intangible air
passed at speed around a shaped wing
easily holds our weight.
So may we, in this life trust to those elements
we have yet to see or imagine,
and look for the true shape of our own self,
by forming it well to the great intangibles about us.

What were you doing twenty years ago? In May of 1999, Bill Clinton was still president. My older son Brian was graduating from high school. My mother had been gone for a year and my dad was in a nursing home. I did not own a computer. My phone was still plugged into a wall. I was selling furniture to cover child support. I was just beginning to dust off the ashes of what my life had been, far too bitter to darken the door of any church, much less open a Bible or pray. Culturally we were somewhere between Monica Lewinsky and Y2K. The Atkins Diet was still a thing. Personally I had been through a major shift in paradigm, and it would not be my last. In fact, I can discern a number of these shifts over the last six decades.

A paradigm shift, according to Webster’s Dictionary, is an important change that happens when the usual way of thinking about or doing something is replaced by a new and different way. In what ways were you thinking and doing twenty years ago? (And what was this church like twenty years ago?) Twenty years from now, I shall be 82. Please tell me I’ll be retired by then. Even our yet unborn grandson will be an adult by then. I don’t know in what ways I will be thinking and doing at that time, and I don’t know what form the Community Congregational Church, United Church of Christ of Belvedere-Tiburon will have taken by then. You see, all of that is yet to be imagined. And today, we have an appointment called by Divine Spirit to do exactly that. Imagine.

The story of the Acts of the Apostles is a story of shifting paradigms. A raggedy group of impoverished peasants started following a young rabbi through the hills of Galilee. Their usual way of thinking and doing had them piecing together some old nets to catch a few fish to feed themselves and hopefully earn enough to survive. Then this insurgent comes along and tells them there is something better, and they drop their nets and start following him. They traded their usual way of thinking and doing for a new and different way. Until the crucifixion happened. And forty days later at the Feast of Pentecost, Peter, this impetuous, bumbling, foot-in-his mouth former fisherman stood up and

preached one of the most powerful Spirit-filled sermons known in the entire history of the church and word began to spread. A new sect of Judaism had been born, centered in Jerusalem. Until the Romans destroyed the city. And these particular Jews, called "People of the Way," would later be scattered throughout the Empire and begin sharing this new way of living with everyone they met. This scattering thrust them into new paradigm, one that they could never have imagined before, because no one had an inkling that this message, this gospel, this good news, was for anyone outside the Jewish household ... until Peter's vision of the great sheet. There was an uproar. People were incensed. This was our God. How could our God do the unthinkable and call Gentiles into this way of life without having them first become observant Jews? They thought Peter had gone absolutely mad ... until he laid it all out for them to see and hear. Then, it says, they quieted down.

I know you get the picture. The evolution never stops, even though we take each successive paradigm and enshrine it as the faithful tradition. We do our best to stop the evolution, until the next revolution happens. Over the last fifteen months I have done my best to highlight the fact that we are at the brink of the next revolution, or the New Reformation as we have been calling it. In the Seventies and Eighties, the Community Congregational Church became simply "CCC." I've read the old news clippings. This place was the hottest thing going. It was on the edge, the expression of a new paradigm. There seemed to be no limit to where it would go. Until the limitations expressed themselves. And then, in a fashion that was very understandable, the paradigm of CCC, the usual way of thinking and doing things, was enshrined as the faithful tradition. And we, in many ways, have become its guardians, doing our best to keep things as they are. Until twenty years from now when many of us will have moved on, leaving a building in need of yet another roof for other generations to deal with. We sit here in this place today with the forces of evolution thrusting us ever forward, when we'd rather just stay right where we are. Why can't we just leave well enough alone? Why can't we just enjoy our shrine until we're done with it? Why can't we let future generations carry this place forward in their own way? These questions are merely rhetorical, and my task here is to keep them from becoming moot.

During the interim process in the months prior to my arrival, you were goaded by a very forward-thinking, no-holds-barred, evolutionary thinker named Irene Laudeman, who told you all kinds of uncomfortable things, at the same time that I was telling Scarsdale Congregational Church all kinds of uncomfortable things. This is what interim ministers do. Interims have a very limited time to facilitate a shift in paradigm from one settled minister to the next one. But this time was different. Irene told you that you had a window of opportunity of about three years to turn this ocean liner around. I accepted this call as your settled minister with that understanding. And as Bill Eichhorn reminded us at my installation service earlier this year, we're about half-way through that window of opportunity. In a few minutes we're going to have a conversation about the major capital expenditures that are required in order to keep this building sound and functional for the next twenty years. In other words, we're trying to extend our window of opportunity. These issues are real and literal. But they also exist as metaphor for the community we are trying to become.

The closest we came to a working vision statement in the interim process was that "CCC will be a place where people in mid-life who are wrestling with the BIG questions of life can come and join others who are walking a spiritual path and engage in spiritual community through contemplative

practices.” My understanding is that there were some objections to focusing on a particular age bracket for targeted outreach, and in the face of those objections no vote was ever taken. In our quest for unanimity, we never reached a simple unity. And so we are existing today without a clear vision statement to guide us, and as difficult as it will be to accomplish, I think it’s time for that to change. There were a number of possible vision statements that grew out of the interim process. Another one—that was ultimately rejected—was this one: “CCC will remain largely the same as it is today, but with an added focus on welcoming guests and providing a rich worship experience. This would feel like home for most people in CCC and may grow a bit in the near term, but over the long run will likely decline.” I can imagine it was rejected due to the last phrase that “over the long run, it will likely decline.” But let’s consider the rest of it. “CCC will remain largely the same as it is today,” meaning our usual way of thinking and doing has become enshrined “with an added focus on welcoming guests and providing a rich worship experience,” which is exactly what we have been doing here for the last year and a half. “This would feel like home for most people.” It does. “It may grow a bit in the near term.” It has. I think we can all understand that this rejected vision statement is the one that we’re living by. And that is why I say that this is a pivotal moment in the life of our community, as we approve the slate of officers for the coming year. It is one of the sacred responsibilities expressed in our Covenant, and it is something we do carefully and prayerfully each year in the ongoing work of vision and discernment.

We are also asking the membership to consider some large capital expenditures to address our rapidly aging building. Our sacred space is indeed sacred for us, and as we have learned, these issues cannot remain unaddressed without further damage and greater expenses to come. We are governed here, not by our Board or our congregation; not really. We are governed by our covenants, those voluntary agreements that we’ve already made with one another to walk together hand in hand. So in the words of David Whyte, “may we in this life trust to those elements we have yet to see or imagine, and look for the true shape of our own self, by forming it well to the great intangibles about us.” Let us imagine the Community Congregational Church of the year 2039. Let us think about how it would be if it all worked out, if this community not only survived but thrived, and carried the good news to the grandchildren of millennials who will inhabit this world long after we’re gone. Let us make our prayerful decisions accordingly.