

## ***“Embracing the Mystery”***

Rev. David Gregory

May 26, 2019

Sixth Sunday of Easter



### **First reading**

from “A Vision of Enchantment” by Richard Rohr in *Everything Belongs*

Religion has lost sight of Jesus’s message. It has not tended to create seekers or searchers, has not tended to create honest humble people who trust that God is always beyond them. We aren’t focused on the great mystery. Rather, religion has tended to create people who think they have God in their pockets, people with quick, easy, glib answers. That’s why so much of the West is understandably abandoning religion. People know the great mystery cannot be that simple and facile. If the great mystery is indeed the Great Mystery, it will lead us into paradox, into darkness, and into journeys that never cease. That is what prayer is about.

### **Second reading**

from Fyodor Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*

Love people even in their sin, for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love all of God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand of it. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the world with an all-embracing love.

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A hundred years ago this week, there was a gathering in Philadelphia of about six thousand ministers, theologians, and evangelists. There were white men and white women in attendance, but the speakers were only men. With the Great War just ended, the United States was now emerging as a superpower. Women were on the very brink of gaining the right to vote. Modernity was invading every aspect of American culture, and these men believed that something had to be done in order to arrest such chaos. According to Matthew Sutton, author of *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism*, in a lengthy op-ed in yesterday’s New York Times, the people at this gathering believed that God had chosen them “to call Christians back to the ‘fundamentals’ of the faith, and to prepare the world for one final revival before Jesus returned to earth.” After this, they

would refer to themselves as the World's Christian Fundamentals Association. Sutton believes that this was the beginning of a new reactionary movement within American Christianity, one without precedent, theologically. The members of this movement would go on to do battle with all forms of modernism, including science and the theory of evolution or any attempt to view scripture in a critical way, as well any movement that would seek to integrate people of diverse cultures—particularly those of African descent.

Fundamentalism (as it came to be known) was the precursor to modern Evangelicalism, which by 1980 had trained its sights on the American political system, in order to move our traditions of governance from healthy debate and compromise to a system of polarized opposites vying for power at any cost, now even at the cost of their own reputations as guardians of moral purity, especially in the last three years (I digress). Today's message is not meant as a political one. I share these thoughts not to call us to a polarized action. I'm not asking you to become an anti-fundamentalist. That would imply that we have all the answers. It would mean that we consider ourselves to be right about everything. It would simply give us our own brand of fundamentalism, when we've already made a covenant together to "live out the questions together hand in hand," and to "experience the moments of our lives in spontaneous response to the call of God." In a very real sense, we have no idea what we're doing, and herein lies the beauty of it all. The gift is in the mystery. The path is in the paradox.

These words from Richard Rohr are not recent. They are from one of his earlier books, published twenty years ago.

*Religion has lost sight of Jesus's message. It has not tended to create seekers or searchers, has not tended to create honest humble people who trust that God is always beyond them. We aren't focused on the great mystery. Rather, religion has tended to create people who think they have God in their pockets, people with quick, easy, glib answers. That's why so much of the West is understandably abandoning religion. People know the great mystery cannot be that simple and facile. If the great mystery is indeed the Great Mystery, it will lead us into paradox, into darkness, and into journeys that never cease.*

Last week we took a look at things that were happening here twenty years ago, and we spent some time envisioning things as they could become twenty years from now. These days, when most American churches are thinking in terms of survival, our own thoughts turn toward vision, strategy, programming, and executing plans for a sustainable future. This week, I'm here to ask *why?* Why would it matter to us what happens here long after we're gone? Maybe it matters to us, and maybe it doesn't, but the answer to the question does not appear in the past or in the future. It only appears to us in the present moment.

There is an energy that we call life; it is that which breathes us and beats our hearts. It is the energy of the sun, the moon, the planets and stars, galaxy after galaxy after galaxy. It is the energy of a chipmunk running around outside our windows, the birds and the deer and even the coyotes that inhabit our immediate environment. It is the blade of grass in the middle of our lawn, and it is the sweeping vistas of the San Francisco Bay. Everything we see and everything we do not see is energy expressed in varying degrees of frequency. This is not a New Age speculation. It is science. It is physics. It is quantum

theory. It is integral theory. It is our conscious evolutionary spiral. In religious and theological terms, we call it Holy Spirit, and where Holy Spirit is concerned, the more we know, the less we know, and the better we are for it. For Richard Rohr it is the darkness of a journey that does not ever cease. It is amazing. It is life-giving. It is everything we need. Right now. In the present moment.

As a leader in this community, I have a pastoral responsibility to follow my own call, to set the tone for our journey. I'm not here to package it, or even preach it to you. I don't have a formula for you to live by. I don't have a list of seven steps for our church's success. I'm just here to keep on living, to listen deeply to Spirit, to tie us to whatever traditions are helpful and meaningful, and to allow that Spirit to draw us forward. Our plans, our strategies, our vision—these are all vitally important, but they are only one side of the coin. What is on the other side is the energy that makes it happen. It is the thing that can upend all of our own plans and take us in a completely different direction. And if we live out the questions together, we won't need to be anxious about the future. The future will simply be there. It's a paradox, I know. And the beauty of the paradox is love.

*Love people even in their sin [another way of saying love your polar opposite], for that is the semblance of Divine Love and is the highest love on earth. Love all of God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand of it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come at last to love the world with an all-embracing love.*

Love is the strategy. Love is the vision. Love is God.