

“Where is God?”

Rev. David Gregory

May 27, 2018

First Sunday after Pentecost



First Reading

from *Grounded: Finding God in the World, A Spiritual Revolution*
by Diana Butler Bass

There is much evidence for religious decline across the West, and much attention is paid to the growth of fundamentalist religious, especially in the Global South and developing world. But in some ways, theories of decline or growth are not really the point. Roiling around the planet is a shifting conception of God. In a wide variety of cultures, God has become unmediated and local, animating the natural world and human activity in profoundly intimate ways. Of course, this has always been the path of mystics in the world's religions, what I often call the “minor chord” of faith. Now, however, the personal, mystical, immediate, and intimate is emerging as the dominant way of engaging the divine. What was once reserved for a few saints has now become the quest of millions around the planet—to be able to touch, feel, and know God for one's self.

Scripture Reading

John 14:25-27

Adapted from the *New Revised Standard Bible*

(Jesus said to his disciples,) “I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit ... will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let the be afraid.”

Where is God? It seems like a simple question to ask, particularly in times of societal anxiety. We always want to know where God is when children are shot in their schools, when skyscrapers fall, or when superpowers turn a blind eye to genocide. When things hurt, when we get sick, when spouses leave, or children stray, we always want to know where God is. When we're struggling financially, when we've lost a job, or can't make ends meet, we want to know where God is. Historically, many of us have been taught that God is this transcendent masculine being who lives far, far away in a place called the “third heaven,” and that our lives are made up of a series of tests, which, if we pass, will enable us to go there and be in that place with him when we die.

I was six years old when my beloved grandfather—my rather constant companion—passed away. “Where did he go?” I asked. “He’s in heaven with God,” came the answer. It’s an answer that for the last 55 years I have found pretty unsatisfying. If Grandpa is in heaven with God, then he isn’t here, and God isn’t here either (this why we all need therapy). For this and many other reasons, I have found many forms of Christian faith unsatisfying. I can always smell an elaborate scheme, and I’ve heard a lot of them in my life. Let’s just stop with the scheming, why don’t we, and get real. It is very possible that we’ve spent centuries asking the wrong questions, so now is the time to change the trajectory and get to a different destination.

Today’s reading is from Diana Butler Bass, an important historian, a rather brilliant theologian, and an increasingly prolific author. She has made an art form out of observing culture, identifying trends, and looking at the broader evolution of Christian faith, particularly mainline Protestantism. She grew up Methodist, and then, like me, took a youthful detour into evangelicalism before embarking on a lifelong quest for a faith with intellectual integrity that is also spiritually satisfying. She ended up Episcopalian, but plays well with others. She has been a great friend to many of us in the United Church of Christ, because her writings are filled with brutal self-assessments of where we are, and where we might be headed as a denomination. For me, her writings always strike a very hopeful chord, that this New Reformation we are all part of, whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, is a really, really good thing. This New Reformation has to do, she says, with a shifting conception of God—one that has always been embraced by mystics in all the world religions. What’s happening now, she says, is that “the personal, mystical, immediate, and intimate is emerging as the dominant way of engaging the divine. What was once reserved for a few saints has now become the quest of millions around the planet—to be able to touch, feel, and know God for one’s self.”

Let’s not make this difficult. The answer to the question “Where is God?” is found by asking “Where am I?” If the divine is present in you, then wherever you are, that’s where God is. This need not be such a radical thought, but where Christianity is concerned, it often is. It is what Richard Rohr calls the “reversing of engines,” something that is really found in the teachings of Jesus. We just didn’t listen. Jesus spoke of Holy Spirit, our Helper, our Advocate, living not in some far-off heaven, but *in us*. This is the gift of Pentecost, the clear manifestation of God right here, right now, in ways that are sometimes indescribable, but always completely real. Today, I am very happily aware that I am preaching to the choir. And here is what I mean by that.

I know that prior to my arrival you did a great deal of self-study, soul-searching, visioning, making implementation plans. This has been the very necessary strategy designed to knock us off of dead center, to wake us up, to compel us away from our sense of homeostasis. We’ve learned a lot, and we’ve come face to face with the fact that we are not immune to the problems plaguing all Mainline Protestants who are locked in an existential struggle. And if things do not change, there will come a day and a time where this ministry will have run its course and succumbed to the slumber of statistical decline. But if we leave the conversation there, we’ve missed the most important thing of all, that “God is here,” if you will. In other words, this cutting-edge shift in the conception of God, this new reformation, so to speak, has already happened here, and it finally

explains for me my very physical response to my first click of your website when I saw the words, "Celebrating the Spirit in all people, in all things."

Something in the DNA of this place tells me that this green growing edge of Christianity has been going on here for a very long time. What if we just get up out of our chairs now and keep going? What if we decide to stay at the cutting edge? What if we continue to lead the way, and become the thing that's happening here at the top of the rock? What if we, instead of being the church that no one knows is here, become a beacon of something greater, something better, something more life-giving than schemes and strategies? What if we just get in the flow of Spirit in the present moment and start dreaming together, start creating together, start moving together to make this world a better place because we practice the presence of Spirit? What if we pray together and move mountains? What if we rattle everyone's cages just before we let them out? What if we start telling the truth about where God is?

The really good news this morning is that the Community Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, of Belvedere-Tiburon (thank God we've never tried to put all of that on a sign) is at the very cutting edge of where Christianity is going. This is the Christian faith that survives in the new millennium. We got to the party early. Let's not go home now that the rest of the guests are starting to arrive.

Amen.