

“Flowing in Spirit”

Rev. David Gregory

June 10, 2018

Third Sunday after Pentecost



First reading

Excerpt from Six Recognitions of the Lord by Mary Oliver

*Every summer the lilies rise
and open their white hands until they almost
cover the black waters of the pond. And I give
thanks but it does not seem like adequate thanks,
it doesn't seem
festive enough or constant enough, nor does the
name of the Lord or the words of thanksgiving come
into it often enough Everywhere I go I am
treated like royalty, which I am not. I thirst and
am given water. My eyes thirst and I am given
the white lilies on the black water. My heart
sings but the apparatus of singing doesn't convey
half what it feels and means. In spring there's hope,
in fall the exquisite, necessary diminishing, in
winter I am as sleepy as any beast in its
leafy cave, but in summer there is
everywhere the luminous sprawl of gifts,
the hospitality of the Lord and my
inadequate answers as I row my beautiful, temporary body
through this water-lily world.*

Scripture reading

Psalm 63:1-7 (New Revised Standard Bible)

*O God, you are my God, I seek you,
my soul thirsts for you,
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
So I will bless you as long as I live;
I will lift up my hands and call on your name.
My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.*

I often introduce myself in this new community of mine by explaining where I work. Here is the scene: “I am the new minister at Community Congregational Church,” I say to the blank stare. Then I begin to describe where we are, here at the top of Rock Hill, and invariably I am interrupted with the words, “Oh, you mean CCC! I never knew what that stood for.” And in these three short months I’ve been with you, I have decided that there is a very worthy pursuit being handed to us by these random voices around us, and the pursuit centers around this very question, “What does CCC stand for?” (I’ll clue you in: the answer has little to do with our name.) This week I happened upon a sentence in *The Rebirthing of God* by John Philip Newell, and for me it captures—more than any other sentence—just what is happening up here on the top of this rock. Newell says:

If the river of our Christian story is not flowing, we will cease to be, for we will cease to be in tune with the very nature of the universe, [which is] forever seeking new form, forever unfolding into what has never been known before.

Fifty-nine years ago (in 1959) a Christian church was born in the community of Tiburon, born within a two-year old denomination called the United Church of Christ. Who knew what any of that was going to mean? In the six decades since, our denomination has proven itself to be an evolving one, and we are an evolving congregation within an evolving denomination, in an evolving religious and spiritual tradition, in an evolving culture, within an evolving ecosystem we call Earth. In other words, we are a Christian church that has never stopped and parked in the

space reserved for “Christian Church.” Our development was never arrested. We never got caught in a single dogma. We never tried to wear the shoes that were too small for us, because our toes just kept on growing. So at our very root, we are a Christian church that has extended itself as a center for religious and spiritual evolution. “We are a river of Christian story forever seeking new form, forever unfolding into what has never been known before.” This is why we attract Christians and non-Christians in equal parts, because our passion is always on the evolutionary edge. Evolution is at the core of our being, individually and collectively, and probably explains why you’ve called a Quaker-Metho-Bapti-Presby-Congregationalist who plays nice with Anglicans and Buddhists to be your minister.

We are a spiritual community caught in the heresy of evolutionary flow, and our heresy is our honesty. We can honestly say that these exquisite words of our contemporary, Mary Oliver, who speaks of summer and its “luminous sprawl of gifts,” can be as nourishing as those of the ancient Hebrew psalmist who sings about “a soul that is satisfied as with a rich feast.” Their metaphors—as well as our own—take us far, far downstream in this river of our Christian story, this river of Spirit, to a place that is easy, happy, and peaceful. And it is important to note that this evolution happens to us individually and collectively. Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane that his followers would all be one. *That they may all be one* is the motto of our denomination.

Writer/philosopher Ken Wilber is one of the cutting-edge thinkers of the new century, and has brought the evolutionary model of integral theory to a place where it frames this new thing that is being birthed in places like the one we inhabit. Wholeness, he says, begins with oneness. When we are born, we make no distinction between ourselves and our mothers and everything else around us. Then ego develops, and we become conscious of our self. There is nothing wrong with the ego unless we stop with the ego. It is when we take our undiminished individuality and bring it into oneness with others that we become whole beings. I believe that this is the oneness spoken of by Jesus, and the unity we can experience here. So here we are in the year 2018, a river of Christian story, forever seeking new form, forever unfolding into what has never been known before, and flowing in Holy Spirit into one single, deeper stream.

In the last few weeks, Carol and Bob have turned me on to a podcast or two of John Philip Newell’s fascinating talks around the country, and in one of them he spoke of being in St. Giles Cathedral in Edinburgh, the mother church of all Scottish Presbyterianism. Thirteen years ago, I had the privilege of singing in St. Giles with my friends from Rochester, so when I heard Mr. Newell speak about the place, I could enjoy my body memory along with the story. He spoke of the four ancient pillars in that room, and he said to the crowd, “One day these pillars will be no more. One day our scriptures will be no more. And one day, Christianity will be no more.” His talk was then interrupted by a very neatly dressed professional woman who stood to her feet and resolutely exited the building on her very noisy high heels. Before the door slammed behind her, she could be heard to exclaim, “HERETIC!” I should think today that in this very evolutionary place living under the sign that says CCC, we should embrace this same fearless heresy as our own. For we are fully aware—are we not?—that we live in one of the least religious counties of the entire United States of America.

Recently in an electronic conversation with Molly Baskette, the minister of First Church in Berkeley and author of the book *Real Good Church*, I told her where my new church was, and her response to me was, “If you can grow a church there, you can grow a church anywhere.” Maybe there was a compliment in there somewhere. At any rate, the Christianity that was doesn’t really play here. And here’s an interesting thought: Who says it needs to? Why does “church renewal” in the minds of so many mean a return to something we had before? Who wants to go back in time, anyhow? Why would we be so enamored with all the bad hair and polyester, anyway?

It was the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah who delivered a message from the Hebrew God to a disassembled people whose temple lay in ruins: “I know the plans I have for you, plans for a future, with hope.” There is something new being birthed here, something forever seeking new form, forever unfolding into what has never been known before. We are the midwives of this religious revolution, this spiritual evolution. And we are fully ready, I believe, for this delivery, are we not?

Amen.



The prophet Jeremiah