

“Real Is Better Than Perfect”

Rev. David Gregory

June 16, 2019

First Sunday after Pentecost

First reading

Proverbs 8:1-11 from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Do you hear Lady Wisdom calling?
Can you hear Madame Insight raising her voice?
She’s taken her stand at First and Main,
at the busiest intersection.
Right in the city square
where the traffic is thickest, she shouts,
“You—I’m talking to all of you,
everyone out here on the streets!
Listen, you idiots—learn good sense!
You blockheads—shape up!
Don’t miss a word of this—I’m telling you how to live well,
I’m telling you how to live at your best.
My mouth chews and savors and relishes truth—
I can’t stand the taste of evil!
You’ll only hear true and right words from my mouth;
not one syllable will be twisted or skewed.
You’ll recognize this as true—you with open minds;
truth-ready minds will see it at once.
Prefer my life-disciplines over chasing after money,
and God-knowledge over a lucrative career.
For Wisdom is better than all the trappings of wealth;
nothing you could wish for holds a candle to her.”



Icon of Sophia (Wisdom)

Second reading

from *The Brink of Everything* by Parker Palmer

I envy people who have whatever it takes to practice classic contemplative disciplines day in and day out—practices that help them get beyond the smoke and mirrors and see the truth about themselves and the world. I call these people “contemplatives by intention,” and some I’ve known seem to be able to get ahead of the train wreck. But I’m not a member of that blessed band. I’m a “contemplative by catastrophe.” My wake-up calls generally come after the wreck has happened and I’m trying to dig my way out of the debris I’m still on that path, and daily I stay alert for the disillusionment that will reveal the next thing I need to know about myself and/or the world Whatever it is, I’ll work my way through it until a hopeful reality is revealed on the other side.

As most of you know, I've just returned from the annual gathering of the Northern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ, where on Friday morning our church was recognized for sixty years of ministry in Tiburon. That's right folks, we are sixty. Organized in 1959 by a group of Protestant folk interested in having another religious choice in a new suburban neighborhood, the Community Congregational Church of Belvedere-Tiburon was the mission of a brand new denomination. Just two years earlier, the Congregational and Christian Churches joined with the Evangelical and Reformed Church to form the United Church of Christ.

The first decade of CCC appears to have been met with some significant obstacles and perhaps a bit of an identity crisis. Early church bulletins show a very traditional liturgy with patriarchal language, much like you would expect in mid-century America. But Tiburon was apparently never a typical place. With the ministry of Frank Evans who arrived—I think—in 1967, the church itself began to change. The moniker “CCC” prevailed, as it has to this day. And those initials have meant different things to different people at different times.

Today I am joining what appears to be a long tradition of giving alternative meanings to our chosen acronym. It was once suggested that CCC could refer to “Community Conversational Church.” Recently I unearthed an unfortunate piece of history in a very early church directory, printed mistakenly (I hope) with a cover that reads “Community Congressional Church.” There are times when spell check wants to go there, but we can hardly blame a software program for a misprint in the early 1960s.

We often identify as a community of contemplative seekers. In this week's Friday email I suggested that CCC could stand for a "Contemplative Community that Congregates." For those who have little interest or understanding of the theological roots of New England Congregationalism, this might serve to express our practice rather than a given belief system. With all the talk these days around Celtic spirituality, we could also be known as a “Community of Celtic Consciousness.” If Celtic Christianity seems to be a new idea for you, it probably isn't really. Through the next several months I hope to show you that it describes, perhaps better than anything else, who we really are with respect to the broader idea of Christianity. But this will take some time, so bear with me.

There is a poetic book within the Hebrew Scripture known to us as the Book of Proverbs, traditionally thought of as a collection of the sayings of Solomon, though the source, of course, is never really that clear. Within this poetry there are large sections in which Wisdom is personified, as in the reading for today, where Lady Sophia is calling us to deeper life. From the busiest intersection of human activity she is calling us to live well, listen to truth, and to follow good disciplines, which she says are to be preferred over chasing after money or a lucrative career.

We live in an intersection of human activity, do we not? Like Lady Wisdom, we live at First and Main, with all of its crazy noise and confusion. We live in a world that is careening toward environmental collapse, where the pursuit of wealth at all costs has no regard for science, for the future, or for the wise stewardship of resources. Our conference adopted a resolution yesterday in support of the Green New Deal, recognizing that this Deal does not do everything to represent our end goals, but that it does express our desire to turn the ship around while there is still time. It feels a little like urging people to exit a burning building, and they refuse, even though they smell the smoke and see the fire, because they've been told to question the truth of what they see and hear and feel. It is not a wise thing to make a pretense out of the truth, and it is even less wise to follow leaders who do so.

Lady Sophia stands at the intersection of the Senate and the House, saying—in the words of Eugene Peterson —“You blockheads! Pay attention and don’t wait!” It is easy to point out the absence of wisdom in the general culture. It is trickier to do so within our own souls. That is why I love the people who bring it home to me in ways that I can understand—people like John Dorhauer, the General Minister and President of our denomination, who shared deeply with us over the last two days about the wise stewardship of our call in a culture that truly needs our message. It’s why I love people like Parker Palmer, Quaker activist visionary and writer. His latest book is called *The Brink of Everything*, but I particularly love the subtitle, which is *Grace, Gravity, and Getting Old*. He is so real, so transparent, so accessible. I don’t know about you, but I find great hopefulness in the Palmers and the Dorhauers of this world, who admit their inabilities to do everything right when it comes to spiritual life.

Parker Palmer writes of a time in the 1960s when he visited with Thomas Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. He was so enamored with the spiritual life of the monks in that place that he considered joining them in their life of daily classic contemplative disciplines—practices which he says helped them to “get beyond the smoke and mirrors and see the truth about themselves and the world.... [c]ontemplatives by intention.” And then he tells why he could not be one of them.

I’m a “contemplative by catastrophe.” My wake-up calls generally come after the wreck has happened and I’m trying to dig my way out of the debris I’m still on that path, and daily I stay alert for the disillusionment that will reveal the next thing I need to know about myself and/or the world Whatever it is, I’ll work my way through it until a hopeful reality is revealed on the other side.

For me this is the very best of spiritual practice, or as Deepak Chopra has defined it, “the ability to observe oneself without judgment.”

The first step in contemplative spirituality, you see, may just be found in the words, *lighten up*. Perhaps we should covenant together to take ourselves and each other just a little less seriously.

We aren’t tucked away in a monastery these days. We’re in the public square. We’re at First and Main, otherwise known as FaceBook and Twitter, or Fox News and MSNBC. We live in the cacophony of a screaming world. Everyone is yelling, and no one is listening. In this Contemplative Community that Congregates, perhaps the greatest way to accomplish our mission is to become the people who simply listen.



Listening
Shiloh Sophia McCloud