

“All That Is Unseen”

Rev. David Gregory

June 17, 2018

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost



First reading

from Evelyn Underhill,

found in Common Prayer by Shane Claiborne

Charity is the live wire along which the power of God, indwelling our finite spirits, can and does act on other souls and other things, rescuing, healing, giving support and light. Such secret intercessory prayer ought to penetrate and accompany all our active work. It is the supreme expression of the spiritual life on earth. It moves from God to others through us, because we have ceased to be self-centered units, but are woven into the great fabric of praying souls, the “mystical body” through which the work of Christ on earth goes on being done.

Scripture reading

Mark 4:26-34

(Adapted from the New Revised Standard Bible)

(Jesus) said, “The realm of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

He also said, “With what can we compare the realm of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.”

With many such parables, he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

I begin today with a story about a boy by the name of Butch Irwin. The year was 1967, and I was a fourth grade student at Denver Place Elementary School in Wilmington, Ohio. Butch was in the sixth grade – bigger, stronger, and meaner. He lived on the other side of town. Normally I walked the five blocks to and from school with kids from my own neighborhood, but for some reason that day I was walking alone. I had just crossed the street and was ready to turn to the right and head up the hill, when Butch came up behind me, grabbed me by the shoulder and pushed me to the ground. When I got up, he took his fist and pounded my upper arm and told me never to walk that way again. When I got home I told my mother what had happened. I was thinking she might decide to ever after come and pick me up every day in the car so I wouldn't have to face Butch again. Unfortunately for me, she made a different decision. What I got was a lesson on how to be a good Quaker.

She told me not to fight back, of course, to stay with others, to ignore him and perhaps he would go away. I didn't see how that was going to work, so I began taking a different route through the next sub-division, a path that was more than twice as far (something I did pretty much to the end of the school year). This would not be my last experience with a bully, but it was definitely the one that was indelible. It was the first time I can recall feeling frightened, vulnerable, and disempowered. Most would say that it was one of life's necessary lessons, and I suppose that's true.

The next fall, Butch went on to Junior High, and I never saw him again. I guess his family moved away. I got older, started riding my bike to school. Life went on. But, here I am fifty years later, still talking about it. Hello, therapy? Perhaps there's a little unresolved anger, and some frustration that the bully got away with it, that I was the one to make the adjustment and to let him own that sidewalk on the corner of Lincoln Street and Lorish Avenue. Why do Quakers have to be so nice, even when they're angry?

This past Thursday in the group we call Stone Soup, I shared this reading from Evelyn Underhill, the English novelist, poet, and Christian mystic writer of the early 20th Century.

Charity (love) is the live wire along which the power of God, indwelling our finite spirits, can and does act on other souls and other things, rescuing, healing, giving support and light It is the supreme expression of the spiritual life on earth. It moves from God to others through us, because we have ceased to be self-centered units, but are woven into the great fabric of praying souls....

I thought we were going to talk about prayer, and how we plug into this live-wire we call Spirit, giving us the energy to do good and loving work in this world. And that is when Carolyn Long opened her mouth to speak. There were tears in her eyes as she told us about the letter she had written to our legislators that morning about the children being ripped away from their parents, in some cases including nursing mothers being detained and prosecuted while their children, some very young, are warehoused in an abandoned Wal-mart. This is when the energy in the room completely shifted, just like it has in this moment.

You do not have to be a parent to feel this, but from the perspective of a parent, the prospect of my child being taken from me moves beyond mere bullying and into the realm of absolute brutality. And then to hear the writings of Paul the Apostle in the first three verses of Romans 13 employed as some attempt to justify this brutality is beyond insulting. This is what the passage from Romans says:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval.

As the argument goes, the government is appointed by God, and it is a sin to resist that authority. This is the passage of scripture used in the history of our nation to justify all manner of things, including slavery, the subjugation of women, and all minorities, just to name a few. You may remember our former president Richard Nixon following this same line of reasoning when he said during his famous interview with David Frost, "If the president does it, it's not illegal."

We often speak of "those in power," as if there are certain people in this world who, like Butch Irwin, hold all the cards. And suddenly today I'm starting to understand why I'm still angry about that little childish episode. I probably couldn't have fought that kid off; he was twice my size. But something inside of me says that in those moments I conceded my own powerlessness. But I believe, at this late date, that this concession comes from a complete misunderstanding of who we are as people and of how Spirit operates in us, in our experience, and in our environment.

I have said often in this place that any activism we undertake as individuals or in community must come from something deeper than anger. Our outrage is what often flips the switch, but the power of this live wire is Spirit. There is something in this parable of a tiny seed that appears to be dead and dried up, but if you put it in the soil and give it some water, it can grow into something as huge as a tree. If we feel powerless today, then I say we start cultivating the soil, planting the seeds and start watering. Now.

Over the past few days, Sandra, Jolyn, and I have been attending the Annual Gathering of the Northern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ as voting delegates representing you. At the conclusion of yesterday's business session, our Conference Minister, the Rev. Diane Weible read a letter to us. Here in its entirety is the letter:

June 16, 2018

Dear Mr. President and Members of the United States Congress, (with a copy to the Attorney General),

We, the delegates and visitors gathered for the Northern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ Annual Meeting, June 14-17, 2018,

demand that you follow international law and human decency and immediately end the mistreatment and abuse of those camped at our borders seeking asylum in the United States.

In addition, we demand that you allow them to enter this country and follow the process that our ancestors and countless others have followed throughout the years, a process that has identified this country as a country that welcomes immigrants and values diversity. In many cases these human beings are fleeing kidnapping, torture, and abuse in their own country in order to find protection in the United States, a country that has the Statue of Liberty as one of its greatest symbols, proclaiming: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...."

The systematic violation of U.S. and international law that blocks these immigrants at international bridges goes against everything our country stands for. It goes against everything that human decency demands of us. It goes against everything that we stand for as Christians in the United Church of Christ, people of faith who follow one who healed the broken, stood up for the weak, brought strength and courage to people discarded by society.

The Rev. Randy Mayer, a UCC minister in Arizona who has witnessed what is happening at the border, said this:

In my 20 years here being engaged in frontline immigration work, this was probably my most difficult and hopeless day. There were probably 120 migrants looking for support. Most were coming from Guatemala and Honduras, wanting to seek asylum.

There were a lot of women with children who were fleeing horrible domestic violence situations where their ex-husbands are trying to kill them. They had no idea that Attorney General Sessions has changed the laws and that they can't even apply, or if they do, they will be separated from their kids. It was so painful to see them process this news and they are so far from home.

When Attorney General Jeff Sessions insulted all of us by quoting Romans 13 regarding submission to governing authorities, he missed the first line, which states, "There is no authority except that which God has established." Our God is a God who, according to Isaiah 10, says:

Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar? To whom will you run for help? Where will you leave your riches? Nothing will remain but to cringe among the captives or fall among the slain.

All human beings are entitled to being treated as human beings, the way any of us would want to and expect to be treated. The mistreatment and abuse of those individuals who have come to this country asking for help from our country is abhorrent and must end immediately. Signed below in faithful witness.

Representing this church as well as our own selves, we put our signatures on this letter yesterday. It feels like the very least we could do, but out of this tiny seed can grow something much larger.

These are difficult and trying times, and it's easy to lapse into feeling our own powerlessness. But we are not powerless. We are live wires woven into the great fabric of praying souls, but it doesn't end there. When we put feet to our prayers, doing what we can, from where we are, with what we've got, the world is going to change. For the better. It must.

Amen.

