

## “From One Soul To Another”

Rev. David Gregory

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Pentecost 9



### Readings

1 Peter 3:8-11

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Be agreeable, be sympathetic, be loving, be compassionate, be humble. That goes for all of you, no exceptions. No retaliation. No sharp-tongued sarcasm. Instead, bless—that’s your job, to bless. You’ll be a blessing and also get a blessing. Whoever wants to embrace life and see the day fill up with good, here’s what you do: say nothing evil or hurtful; snub evil and cultivate good; run after peace for all you’re worth.

“Some Questions You Might Ask”

from *House of Light* by Mary Oliver

Is the soul solid, like iron?  
Or is it tender and breakable, like  
the wings of a moth in the beak of the owl?  
Who has it, and who doesn’t?  
I keep looking around me.  
The face of the moose is as sad  
as the face of Jesus.  
The swan opens her white wings slowly.  
In the fall, the black bear carries leaves into the darkness.  
One question leads to another.  
Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg?  
Like the eye of a hummingbird?  
Does it have one lung, like the snake and the scallop?  
Why should I have it, and not the anteater  
who loves her children?  
Why should I have it, and not the camel?  
Come to think of it, what about the maple trees?  
What about the blue iris?  
What about all the little stones, sitting alone in the moonlight?  
What about roses, and lemons, and their shining leaves?  
What about the grass?

A great reformation is not an easy place to live in. Long before the pandemic, theologians, teachers, historians, researchers, and even preachers, were pointing to the earmarks of great reformations past, and finding stark correlations with current human culture and religious life. You've been hearing me speak of reformations ever since I arrived, and this topic was the focus of the conversation I had with John Philip Newell in this sanctuary just days before our initial lockdown more than a year and a half ago. That evening, John Phillip spoke of the "Christian household" as he calls it, and how we, along with other religious and spiritual traditions are becoming the midwives of a new creation. It is not certain what is trying to be born, he said, but it's clear that we are in a birthing process. Like the human birthing process, it isn't comfortable. It is painful, in fact, and in the midst of all the uncertainties, there is one thing—and one thing only—that is certain: once the process has begun there is no going back. It is going to happen. You don't get to change your mind at the last moment.

Here in this place, we have plugged in all kinds of models to try to get in front of the curve, noting that reformations are triggered by advancing technology. Five hundred years ago, it was the printing press; at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century it was home computers, the worldwide web, and later, smart phones. And if that weren't enough, we're experiencing a pandemic, which took whatever models we had about the future of church, including the future of *our* church, and upended them as one would an appletart, sending things flying every which way, and leaving us to wonder where, when, and *if* everything will land. And we still do not know.

To add one more surprise to the mix, about ten days ago, the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) released its American Religious Landscape survey for the year 2020. As our friend, renowned church historian Diana Butler Bass said in a CNN op-ed published last Sunday:

*The report resembled those of recent years, affirming now-familiar trends shaping 21st century American religion: increasing racial diversity in Christian communities, the sizable presence of world religions other than Christianity, and the explosive growth of those who are religiously unaffiliated.*

*In other words, there were no major surprises—except one. Unlike previous surveys, this one showed that the decline among white Christians has slowed. Indeed, the percentage of white Christians actually rose slightly due to growth in an unlikely category—an increase among white mainline Protestants, "an uptick" of 3.5% in their proportion of the American population.*

*This uptick is especially surprising when compared to the drop in white evangelical Protestantism. The report pointedly states: "Since 2006, white evangelical Protestants have experienced the most precipitous drop in affiliation, shrinking from 23% of Americans in 2006 to 14% in 2020."*

She concludes: *White mainline Protestantism is growing; white evangelicalism is declining. And that is big news.*

It's not big news because of who's winning or losing. Our religious and spiritual life is not its own political system. It's not a campaign to gobble up a certain set of adherents and claim them as ours. When Jesus told us to "make disciples" he wasn't telling us to make more Congregationalists, Methodists, or Presbyterians. But it is big news that the common assumptions of the last fifty years may have shifted in a way that is unpredictable, to which I say, when everything else in life is unpredictable, it stands to reason that it will be reflected in our spiritual and religious lives and

communities as well. This is how reformations happen. They express themselves in a state of flux, leaving us reaching to find a new normal when the old normal is no longer within reach.

*Then what should we do?* we ask in light of the pandemic, and an explosion of technology and communications. *What should we do?* asked the German reformer, Martin Luther, now that the scriptures were in the hands of the public and not just the priesthood. *What should we do?* asked Peter the Apostle, given the upheavals of Judaic life and culture in the first century. How do we navigate change? How do we gather as a community in the ways that Jesus spoke, taught, prayed about, and modeled for his friends?

In the case of Jesus, on his last night with his friends, he prepared them for an onslaught of change, telling them not to be afraid, because the power to navigate the change would be provided to them. There wasn't going to be an individual who would come and save them individually. The new thing was "ecclesia," this group of "called out ones" that future generations would call "church."

As only Eugene Peterson can say it, in his interpretation of Peter's epistle, we have one job to do, and that is to *bless*. Be a blessing; get a blessing. Model loving, compassionate humility. Run after peace for all you're worth. And why should we do that? Because in the evolving landscape of what we call Christianity (or Judaism, Islam, or Buddhism, for that matter), we're coming to the conclusion that as human beings we are not separate from one another. We share a common essence that makes us one, and the church just happens to be the place where we can practice that truth, model it, and spread it to the world around us. With the explosion of technology and under the magnifying glass of a global pandemic, we are shifting into a mode of accelerating oneness, and perhaps this could explain this very interesting shift in American Christianity. After a century of pulling things apart, perhaps this reformation is about putting things back together.

In the 1920s, with the publishing of a series of booklets called the "Five Fundamentals," what we have come to know as Christian Fundamentalism was born and grew into what we broadly call the Evangelical movement, which divided the Protestant Christian family into two camps, Evangelicals and the Protestant mainline. Evangelicals are broadly represented by groups like the Southern Baptist Convention, the Assemblies of God, and non-denominational mega churches that have crowded the media world over the last fifty years. The Protestant mainline is broadly represented by denominations like the Presbyterian Church USA, the United Methodist Church, the ELCA Lutherans, and our own United Church of Christ. One branch of the family has been about separation, splintering, and sectarianism. The other branch has been about ecumenism, multi-faith cooperation, and unification wherever possible.

I don't believe that one single survey means that everything is about to shift, but I can say that in my six decades of churchgoing, I can feel a shift taking place. If we can lay down our arguments about who is right, and begin to notice the simple needs of the human soul, which is never more on display than during a pandemic, we can begin to see a single human family regardless of race, ethnicity, spiritual or religious background, ability or disability, gender identity or expression, or any other human condition.

Mary Oliver did not live to see this pandemic, but she was definitely one of the midwives of this new creation, this new reformation, as evidenced by her bringing to us the simple question, "What is the shape of the soul?" She concludes that we're all the same more than we are all different. Perhaps we can draw that same conclusion.

