“Evolution of Grace”
Rev. David Gregory
August 18, 2019
10th Sunday after Pentecost

First Reading
from a 1967 speech by Martin Luther King

Power properly understood is nothing but the ability to achieve purpose. It is the strength required to bring about social, political, and economic change. There is nothing wrong with power if power is used correctly. And one of the great problems of history is that the concepts of love and power have usually been contrasted as opposites—polar opposites—so that love is identified with a resignation of power, and power with a denial of love. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at is best is power correcting everything that stands against love.

Second Reading
from The Global Heart Awakens by Anodea Judith

You can replace the concept of God with whatever term, gender, or pantheon you like, but the point is that evolution proceeds, not only toward greater complexity and freedom, but also toward ever more potent powers of creation and destruction. We are approaching a divine awakening of our potential on a scale never before possible. When we can influence the course of life on our planet through global warming, species extinction, or gene splicing—to say nothing of nuclear warfare—we are approaching the power of gods. But have we evolved the wisdom and grace equal to that power? If not, what does it take for us to get there?

My mother always said the best part of going away is coming home, and I repeated those words the other night as we were nearing Tiburon. Though this vacation was not a relaxing one—accommodating the closing of an important Broadway show, the timing of a Muslim holiday, and driving from Manhattan to Rochester and back—it was, at the very least, a change of scenery. We got to enjoy a beautiful drive through the Catskills and the Finger Lakes, touching on the many places I have lived over the past twenty-five years, connecting with family and close friends in ways that were mostly refreshing and sometimes demanding. We welcomed some new people into our family circle, and grieved some pending losses. This is life as it was, as it is, and as it will be. Even so, we came back here seeing ourselves, our work, and our surroundings with new eyes.
Wherever I go, I cannot help but sense this divine awakening spoken of in our second reading today. From my earliest childhood memories of praying “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” I have been on a search for ways to bring this energy of love and peace, this higher consciousness we might call “heaven” down to the earth. I suppose this is the impulse that called me to ministry in the first place, this desire to find something higher to inform and improve the experience of what is. There is in all of us the “groaning of all creation,” a sense that life as we know it cannot go on without some profound changes. And this precarious fragility of earth and humanity began long before 2019. It’s just that the crises of the present day have brought our existential questions starkly into our consciousness.

We, as little gods, have shown ourselves to be extremely powerful. We have quite literally altered the nature of earth in ways that the ancients would have reserved only for the gods. I could give you a litany of those changes—damages, actually—but they are well known to us and to those around us. The crises extend to every part of our existence, from housing to climate change, from destructive campaigns of disinformation to the division of peoples from one another based on every known human condition: race, color, religious belief and spiritual practice, physical and mental impairments, political persuasions. There is a strong push to divide us into our respective encampments. You name it; the momentum of humanity, if we are to believe what we see and hear, is toward separation and hostility. But it is in the bedrock of our Christian tradition, as well as all the other great traditions, to seek to move the earth in the direction of oneness, peace, and love. In the Jewish tradition this very longing is expressed in an ancient Hebrew Song (Psalm 46):

> God is our refuge and strength,  
> a very present help in trouble.

> Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change,  
> though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;

> though its waters roar and foam,  
> though the mountains tremble with its tumult.

> There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,  
> the holy habitation of the Most High.

> God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved;  
> God will help it when the morning dawns.

> The nations are in an uproar, the kingdoms totter;  
> he utters his voice, the earth melts.

> The Lord of hosts is with us;  
> the God of Jacob is our refuge.
And from words of the Christian tradition, the Apostle Paul from Romans:

_We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies._

Today more than ever we are groaning along with the earth, experiencing the labor pains of a New Reformation, a Great Awakening, a birth of something new in us, in our church, in our society, in our world, in our universe. What we must remember in the midst of this storm is that when we sing “The God of Jacob is our refuge,” what we really mean is that this divine energy that we call life is actually ours. We have shown that we have the power to profoundly affect this planet and all of its inhabitants. It’s just that we have used that power to our own detriment. We also have the power to choose something different.

These words of Martin Luther King from a 1967 speech define what that power really is.

_What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love._

The power to choose something different is found in our ability to love. We know love as a feeling, but it is also a choice. The Greeks used four or five different words for love, while in English we lump many meanings together into one word. This may be why we are so confused about the meaning of _love._ “Love implementing the demands of justice.” “Power correcting everything that stands against love.”

In the words of Anodea Judith,

_When we can influence the course of life on our planet through global warming, species extinction, or gene splicing—to say nothing of nuclear warfare—we are approaching the power of gods. But have we evolved the wisdom and grace equal to that power? If not, what does it take for us to get there?_

I mean _really!_ What will it take to get there? It will take the choice to glide in the river of love. Love is the divine energy of change, and change that comes through love will always be good. It will always be healing. It will always be unifying. It will always make a difference for good. Where the church—our church—fits into this flow is that as a spiritual community, together, we are the practice ground for this choice. If we can learn to love one another here, if we can practice, practice, practice the presence and power of love with one another, then we can quite literally begin a movement of energy that will alter the course of the world. The choice is not how we fix all the nations in uproar, all the tottering kingdoms. The choice is to move into this river, whose streams make glad the City of God. Let’s go down to that river, and let it carry us to a brand new place. Let’s awaken to the single choice that is ours to make.