“Just Keep Going”

Rev. David Gregory
August 25, 2019
11th Sunday after Pentecost

First Reading
from Love Poems to God by Rainer Rilke

God speaks to each of us as he makes us, then walks with us silently out of the night. These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your recall,
go to the limits of your longing.
Embody me.
Flare up like a flame
and make big shadows I can move in.
Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.
Just keep going. No feeling is final.
Don’t let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.
You will know it by its seriousness.
Give me your hand.

Second Reading
Psalm 139: 11-12
New Revised Standard Version

If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,” even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.
The summer season has always been a little tough for me as a preacher. July and August in particular have no built-in themes that carry us through the calendar. It is also travel time for many of us, so the flow of what we are trying to say and do together gets interrupted, as it should. What is true in the summertime is that I don’t know who I’ve said what to. I don’t know what it’s been like outside my own head and heart. I can only tell you what my experience of it has been.

We have been on a journey over the summer that has taken us on an exploration of the life force, or the power we call love. While I know there is a risk of being repetitious, the subject is truly endless. As we look deeper and deeper into our own souls, we find ourselves simultaneously in the far reaches of the universe. This, I think, is why the psalmist asks,

> Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?

> If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
> If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

> If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night, even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

It was twenty-five years ago that Jon Kabat-Zinn, the creator of mindfulness-based stress reduction, published his classic book with a title that encapsulates this same idea: Wherever You Go, There You Are. If you and I are indeed temples of the divine, then fleeing from it is an exercise in futility. We might question what we call it, but this energy we call Love, or Life, or Holy Spirit, or God, or whatever, is something we can never define with any objectivity, because doing so requires us to step outside of ourselves, and though we may aspire to do so, it is just not possible. Nor is it really desirable.

Yesterday there was a small gathering in a church-yard cemetery in a tiny village called New Antioch in southern Ohio. It is the burial place of much of my family line, including my parents, grandparents, and some of my great-grandparents, and yesterday my Aunt Betty was laid to rest there. She was less than a week short of her 99th birthday. She was married for 75 years to my father’s older brother Wayne, until he died a few years ago on his own 99th birthday. As my sister Susan was texting me updates about who was there and what a pretty day it was, I spent some of my Saturday looking back on Aunt Betty’s life, and the steadiness with which she approached everything. She was devoutly religious—some would say too much so—but she had lost an infant son, which is in itself a deeply spiritual journey. She raised three others, who survive her. She spent her life in close proximity with the earth; her father was a farmer, and so was her husband. Her youngest son was near my age, and I spent a lot of time at their house which was built on the same farm where my father was born. In some of my earliest memories, Aunt Betty is kneeling in her vegetable garden digging onions for an Irish stew, or she’s one field over, gathering hickory nuts to bake in one of her delicious cakes. Something about her connection with the earth stays with me, as does her commitment to healthy eating and to a life of prayer. I may not have shared her particular religious views, but I find myself wanting to be like her. No matter what happened in her life, she had the ability to focus on what she believed to be true and to just keep going.
 Somehow in these last few weeks I’ve been feeling the storms of life just a little more deeply than usual. The world feels like a precarious place to me. Maybe it’s the erratic nature of our national leadership. Perhaps it is my sister’s illness, and my feelings of powerlessness around it. Perhaps this focus on the power of love is just me, trying over and over and over again to just keep going. The poet Rainer Rilke asks us to “go to the limits of our longings” and then to “just keep going.” Such a conundrum this is. To simultaneously recognize your limitations and exceed them. Keep going; but where?

As the sun sets on this summer season, we look toward the future with new attention, energy, and focus. It’s a little like being dressed in your fresh, crisp new clothes at the bus stop, holding your empty and pristine notebooks, your perfect number 2 lead pencils in hand. There are new tasks to perform, new relationships to be made, new visions to create. I am thinking that this is where we are as a community today, on the brink of something. We don’t know quite what we’re on the brink of, but we’re here at the top of this hill, with brand new chairs beneath us and a new roof over our heads. We are thinking about all the innovations we want to experience together: programming, technology, and media to explore and employ for the future. These are exciting and interesting times, but with all the newness and promise of the future, it really boils down to only one thing, the one thing it’s always been about. It’s an ancient template handed to us in the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, who went to the limits of his longings and still kept going, who seemed to devote himself to loving and healing some pretty desperate people who lived in a world that was every bit as precarious and out of control as our own. And the nice thing about a template is that it’s already been created for us. It only remains for us to step into it and keep going. It is vital that we do so. The earth depends on it. Our work depends on it. Our very lives depend on it.

Day after day, year after year, decade upon decade, just keep going, just keep loving, just keep healing. These are the divine words of the Austrian poet: just keep going; no feeling is final. Don’t let yourself lose me. Nearby is the country they call life. You will know it by its seriousness. Give me your hand. Together, as one, let’s take that hand.