

“School of Love in Session”

Rev. David Gregory

September 9, 2018

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost



Jesus Teaches the People by the Sea
James Tissot

First reading

Ed Bacon from 8 Habits of Love: Overcome Fear and Transform Your Life

We have the ability to change the course of our lives when we become aware of that core of sacredness—which we call the Beloved—and begin to live with it as our guide. Whenever we have a flash of love, innocence, acceptance, inspiration, awe, or wonder, or we’re moved to tears or filled with joy, we must remind ourselves: this is the real me

Beneath our wounds and resentments, our fears and insecurities, our neediness and addictions, we are all loved deeply and unconditionally. We therefore carry within us the capacity to love deeply, unconditionally, and fearlessly.

Scripture reading

1 John 4:16-21 (New Revised Standard Bible)

So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

My mother always said that the best part of going away is coming home. While I may not always have agreed with her, I want to say that it is very good to be back here, in this place, with you, doing this. Something quite important happens when you can step aside for a bit. Besides the obvious refreshment of body, mind, and spirit, you get to see familiar things from a completely different vantage point, and this, I believe, is never a bad thing.

This coming Saturday, the Governing Board of this church will spend a day in retreat, doing much the same thing: looking at familiar things through different eyes. And if the minister and the Board members are successful in this process, we may in turn call upon each of you to do the same. It is vital at this juncture that as a community we remain adaptable and open to change. I'm convinced that the worst thing that could happen right now is for us to become complacent—and complacency is the most natural thing in the world right now.

After a couple of transitional years, homeostasis is knocking at our door, and I would love it if we could make a group decision to leave that door shut and open a different one, and perhaps a few windows while we are at it. What I'm really saying is that we're settling in, and things seem to be going well. There is obviously new energy and enthusiasm in this place, and it would be easy enough to enjoy that energy for a while. In a day when churches are dropping like flies, stability feels a lot like success, but I don't think we should buy into that. What feels like stability now will, in three years or less, get us to the very same place, asking the same questions we asked ourselves over the last two years. And let me be clear: we didn't go through all of that just to end up in the same place, did we? So, it's still about vision. What would we love for the Community Congregational Church to become in the years ahead—something that will be meaningful to new generations of spiritual seekers? As our tribal elders and our wisdom seekers pass from the scene, what are we leaving behind that will remain, once the memories are gone, once the old snapshots are meaningless?

We need to remember that we do not have the luxury of having everything the way we like it for ever. Believing this is the serious error made by congregations like ours, and it is the shortest route to oblivion. So the deeper questions I would like us to consider as we move into 2019 are: "What would we love to become, and what are we willing to let go of in order to get there?"

I will warn you that these questions are unapologetically lifted out of the Irene Laudeman playbook. For those of you who did not meet Irene, she was the interim minister who immediately preceded my arrival here. She asked some really tough questions of you, and although a year ago I was watching from afar, I began asking them of myself as well, and we need to keep asking them. They will keep us at our green, growing edge, individually and collectively. They will help us keep our vision where it needs to be, at 20/20.

Let's begin with that first question, "What would we love to become?" I've chosen today's readings to express what I see as the emerging answer to that question. An episcopal priest named Ed Bacon has written a very helpful book entitled, *8 Habits of Love*, and subtitled *Overcome Fear and Transform Your Life*. To repeat our reading for today, he says

We are able to change the course of our lives when we become aware of that core of sacredness—which we call the Beloved—and begin to live with it as our guide. Whenever we have a flash of love, innocence, acceptance, inspiration, awe, or wonder, or we're moved to tears or filled with joy, we must remind ourselves: this is the real me

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If we have established a single thing about our identity as a spiritual community, it is that we have evolved beyond the usual routines of doctrinal absolutes. Here at the Top of the Rock we never bought into a body of knowledge to which one must subscribe in order to belong. We do not create litmus tests about who's in or who's out. Rather we have led the way in becoming a place that practices far more than it preaches, a place that values experience over belief, people over programs, and artfulness over systems.

Historically, the Community Congregational Church, United Church of Christ of Belvedere-Tiburon (having perhaps taken the Guinness Book record for the longest church name) quickly moved ahead of its time. And in some ways doing that in itself has been a struggle. It is exciting to be on the cutting edge, but it is never easy or comfortable to be there. Over the last sixty years we have seen the good and the bad of what it means to live on this edge. I can tell you one thing: it's never boring. And after times of difficulty and upheaval, it's an easy thing to find our status quo and scurry back to what feels comfortable and safe, but that has never been our calling, and it will never be our calling. Instead, we're being called to be as radical and counter-cultural as we've ever been. We've lived long enough that our very core sacredness, that thing we casually call *love*, has become as radical and as counter-cultural as it was in the days of the Roman Empire, when an insurgent rabbi practiced a radical love that ultimately led to his death.

Jesus of Nazareth was one of those radical, cutting-edge persons whose way of being in this world would today have branded him as a PC do-gooder, a stubborn, rabble-rousing, uncooperative, bending-his-knee-to-a-flag kind of person, and he'd always be in trouble like he always was. I guess what I'm trying to say is *let's make some trouble in this world*. Let's never become that complacent "churchy" community, that smarmy, lukewarm kind of place where we use flowery insider language that wouldn't move a tortoise an inch down the road.

We live in a world that is plagued by fear, fear as big as a mega wildfire, being fanned by technology which is manipulated with evil, inhuman, and unloving intent. It expresses itself in hatred, but hatred isn't the root of it; fear is. And in the words of the first epistle of John, "There is no fear in love." If in this environment we can become a school of radical love, starting with the divine within us, loving ourselves, loving our neighbors as ourselves, loving the earth beneath us, the heavens above, loving the people who disagree with us, loving the people who love us back, loving the ones who don't love us back, loving the ones who do what we hope, loving the ones who will never do anything but disappoint us—if we can love, love, love, love, *LOVE*, there will be little need to worry about our vision and our future. We will be living our future. The school of love is now in session. *Amen.*