

## "A Deeper Well"

Rev. David Gregory

September 15, 2019

14th Sunday after Pentecost



### First Reading

from *The Rebirthing of God* by John Philip Newell

Too often in the past our approach to truth has been to assume that we have it and others do not. Consequently, we have thought that our role is to tell people what to believe. We are being invited instead into a new humility, to serve the holy wisdom that is already stirring in the hearts of people everywhere, the growing awareness of earth's interrelatedness and sacredness. An essential feature of rebirthing within the Christian household will be to remember that the well of truth is not ours. It is deep within the earth and deep within the heart of humanity. Our role is to be a servant of that well.

### Second Reading

*Sleeping in the Forest* by Mary Oliver

I thought the earth  
remembered me, she  
took me back so tenderly, arranging  
her dark skirts, her pockets  
full of lichens and seeds. I slept  
as never before, a stone  
on the riverbed, nothing  
between me and the white fire of the stars  
but my thoughts, and they floated  
light as moths among the branches  
of the perfect trees. All night  
I heard the small kingdoms breathing  
around me, the insects, and the birds  
who do their work in the darkness. All night  
I rose and fell, as if in water, grappling  
with a luminous doom. By morning  
I had vanished at least a dozen times  
into something better.

From my lips, you often hear the name John Philip Newell, the well-known Scottish author, spiritual leader, and activist who will be spending a Friday evening here in February. I've noticed how he loves to use the phrase "the Christian household" to describe something that defies all attempts at categories. It is the broad brush of Christianity as opposed to Judaism or Islam, our two siblings in the family of Abraham. It includes pretty much every version of Christianity that you can think of including Catholic, Evangelical, Reformed, liberal, conservative and everything in between. The Christian household is only theoretical, for it does not exist as a defined group, only as a general idea of people who are vaguely related in little more than name.

In my world, it is like the Lane Family Reunion. My paternal grandmother was born Ruth Lane. My father's middle name was Lane, and so it stands to reason that the Lane family reunion would be a simple thing. Just a gathering of Lanes. Not so. What made the Lane reunion unique was one particular marriage. My mother's brother married my father's cousin, so my second cousin once removed also became my aunt by marriage. Their two sons are my first cousins on my mom's side and third cousins on my dad's. In the 1960's when the older generations of this clan were still alive, many of them having given birth to large farming families, it was bewildering to figure out who belonged where in the Lane household. The Christian household is no less bewildering.

You have Catholicism, which generally claims to be apostolic in terms of succession, starting with Peter and continuing right down through the current papacy, leading a monolithic Church which is the final authority in faith and practice. You have the Reformed Protestants who generally claim to have purified the church about five hundred years ago with the phrase *sola scriptura*, meaning that authority rests not with the church but with scripture, and that one can relate individually to God through personal faith, without any need for priestly intervention. Then there is the mid-century modern version, which is generally light on theology, but claims to follow the teachings of a great teacher named Jesus who has left us with a social gospel aimed at feeding the poor, housing the homeless, and heating the sick. In response to that you have the fundamentalists who cry "liberal" at every turn, and have embraced a vision that claims every word of the Bible is literally breathed out by God, and that this same God who happens to be very angry at Eve for eating the wrong apple, punished his own son Jesus on the cross for the sins of all humankind. But that blood atonement does not apply to you unless you are born again, and in some cases baptized in the name of Jesus. Otherwise an eternity in a literal hell awaits you.

Being right is exhausting. There are as many guardians of Christianity as there are Democrats on a debate stage, all seeking to win the arguments, to stand out against the others, and to become the front-runner. In this bewildering family reunion, everyone at some point has claimed to be the great purifiers, returning the Christian faith to its original intent, one that has been lost until now. One might be tempted then, to throw the Celtic form into the mix and say, "Well, it's really Celtic Christianity that is the right one, and we should then seek to convert the world to this way of thinking." But I want us to understand that by its very nature, Celtic Christianity will not and cannot do that. In no way are we trying to bring forward some ancient form that is the right one. This consciousness is not about returning to something ancient. It is solely and completely about the birth of something new. In my view, Celtic thought is not about returning to some ancient authority that we can whip out in a debate like some sort of trump card that when played halts all other

conversation. As John Philip Newell says, the well of truth is not ours. It belongs to the earth. It is deep within the earth, he says, and deep within the heart of humanity. This is why we in this place need to find a place of quiet in our journey. Though our roots are definitely in the Protestant reformers, and though we've married ourselves into the mid-century liberals, that family reunion has lost its relevance, and we are left simply to ask ourselves "What is the life that we're going to lead in the present moment?" Great-great Aunt Nellie may have given birth to eleven children, but they're all dead now, and listing them won't do anything to heal myself or to heal the world, which is the only real reason we are here. Celtic wisdom is simple and quiet. It is about our roots, pushing ever downward unseen to the human eye.

You don't see leaven in a lump of dough, you only see its effects. The kingdom of heaven is like a little tiny mustard seed. A little bitty acorn contains a huge oak, if it is allowed the quiet freedom to do its thing. Here at Community Congregational Church, we're just a bunch of seedlings, looking for an eventual great harvest. Unbeknownst to the world around us, we are pushing our roots ever downward in search of deeper streams of truth and wisdom. If we can go deep enough, if we can stay long enough, if we can allow ourselves and each other enough quiet, we can get to the unlimited Source that we call Life.

It is not for us to win the arguments, or to seize the prize of being the largest most influential church in the area. We did that already and it didn't work out as planned. We are instead being invited to a new humility, to serve the holy wisdom that is already stirring in the hearts of people everywhere, the growing awareness of earth's interrelatedness and sacredness. It is the same sacredness that Mary Oliver found sleeping in a dry riverbed, listening to all of the small kingdoms breathing around her. Starting from where we are, let's grow some really deep roots.

