

“Holding All of It”

Rev. David Gregory

October 10, 2021

Pentecost 21



Readings

Amos 5:14-15 from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Seek good and not evil—and live! You talk about God, the God-of-the-Angel-Armies, being your best friend. Well, live like it, and maybe it will happen. Hate evil and love good, then work it out in the public square.

Benediction by Molly Bolton

in the blog *Enfleshed: Liturgy That Matters*

On days when your anger is hot,
may the Spirit be an autumn breeze against your face.
On days when your resiliency is low,
may the beloved community pull up a chair for you on the porch.
On days when your mind is stuck in binaries,
may there be room to hold it all together—the sorrow, the beauty,
the bewilderment, the hope.
May we feel in our bodies, that in the holding,
in our togetherness, we are blessed.

I've said it before, and I think it more often than I say it. "The older I get, the less I know with certainty, and the better I feel about it." Last week I had the opportunity to visit the town in Ohio where I spent the first twenty-two years of my life. I hadn't been there in more than five years, and before that only sporadically and for shorter periods of time. It was pretty wonderful to spend time with my sister and her family, and not to have to rush off as I thought I had to so many times before. One thing I brought with me this time was my love for the long daily walks that have always been important, but that have become my lifeline since the beginning of the pandemic. The weather in Ohio was mostly warm and sunny, what we always called "Indian Summer," so I had multiple opportunities to see the sun rise as I covered the ground of my Quaker ancestors, who arrived there at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

One morning found me at the courthouse square, where an historical marker reminded me that my ancestor Joseph Doan donated land for the county seat. I found myself walking past the properties that had been our own since the Civil War, the birthplaces of my parents and grandparents, the front porch where I passed hot summer days with my grandmother, the bench under the college carillon where I sat with my grandfather waiting for the top of the hour so we could hear the beautiful sounds of the bells.

Walking is different from driving. Walking in the early morning is different from walking at high noon. You see things, hear things, feel things, and smell things that you would never experience at other times. In this particular place, I listened for the voices that often get drowned out by the noise of daily life, and those voices were strong. It wasn't strange at all. It wasn't a single voice I heard, but a chorus. Sometimes it felt like a cheering section, and other times a group of instructors trying to get as much in as possible while they had my attention. What struck me was the impermanence of what I saw: structures once sparkling and proud, now neglected and decaying; gravestones worn and discolored, the inscriptions on them no longer so easily read. I carry so much of our ancestral memory, drilled into my head by people who valued history and couldn't stop talking about it. I found myself wondering how much of this memory will die with me because I don't talk about it. The voices I heard said, "There's no point to it unless you tell your story. Not our story; *your* story." And I cannot help but wonder if that wasn't what led the oldest Hebrew prophets like Amos and those of many traditions after him to say *if we don't cry out, if we don't say something, if we do not tell the story, what is the point?*

Amos was a binary kind of guy. In other words, he saw life in stark terms. It was all black and white, little to no gray at all. He lived in Judah during the time of a divided kingdom—Israel to the north, whose capital was Samaria, and Judah to the south with Jerusalem its governing and religious center, and all of this some eight hundred years before Jesus. Amos had words for his neighbors to the north. "Straighten up your act and get with it, or judgment will fall." Or in the words of Bea Arthur's character Maude Finley, "God will get you for that!" There's this holy God, you see, and he expects you to do things his way. God's way is good; your way is evil. Choose the good and make it snappy.

It sounds a little primitive, because it is. And all the rest of scripture right up to the final words of the Book of the Revelation takes this simple primitive thought and develops it into its many complexities. James, John, Paul, and the church mothers and fathers who came after them; reformers and theologians, preachers and authors, all listening to the voices that say, "What's the point of it all, if you don't tell the story?" This, then, becomes the life of the preacher, to pick up the story and move it forward, hopefully in a meaningful and spiritually important way. This idea is captured by Eugene Peterson whose words are meant to give these ancient writings to his children in words that they—and we—can understand. The point is not just to tell the story, but to elucidate it, make it understood, make it live. You say that a powerful God is your friend. Well, stop talking about it and start acting as if that is so. This dance between good and evil never gets resolved within a single human soul. It is the work of the public square. Living in community is the only way any of it makes sense. And the only way to be in community is to engage fully with one another and tell our stories.

For a few years now, I have been following the work of a group of feminist theologians who have developed what they call “Liturgy That Matters.” It goes by the simple moniker *Enfleshed*, which is their way of expressing the stories that get incarnated, embodied, in ways that make a difference. They follow the system of Bible readings we know as the Revised Common Lectionary, but they go in a completely new direction with it. It feels as though they have said something like, “There’s no point to this unless we tell the story.” And then they set about doing just that—in the context of ancient words.

Molly Bolton is a graduate of the San Francisco Theological Seminary and an ordained minister in our United Church of Christ. I was struck by her prayer in this week’s liturgy, which moves us from the primitive binaries of an ancient prophet to the complexities of post-modern life, and still manages to maintain that same prophetic voice. Her words fed my soul this week, and if I do not share them, then what’s the point?

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It may sound a little crazy, but it’s almost as if she was with me on my walks last week. Autumn breezes against my face; walking by the front porches of my past and present; feeling stuck in the either/or questions; finding sorrow, beauty, bewilderment, and hope; feeling an embodied sense of all that has been entrusted to me. All that is being held within me.

We in this beloved community *are* a front porch, and we’ve pulled up these chairs for one another. We’re serving a little iced tea and a warm cookie, and we’re holding with and for each other—all of it. We’ve got the complexities of what a global pandemic has done for us: good things and bad things, opportunities and challenges. There are things that have been added to us and things that have been taken away. There are encouraging signs, and other things that make us fearful. We have the joy of new friendships and the grieving for those we’ve lost. We have seasons of drought and the blessings of moisture. We have youth and old age. And all of it we hold.



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