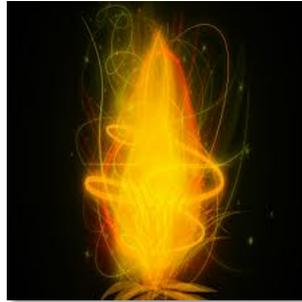


“The Essential Living Flame”

Rev. David Gregory

November 10, 2019

22nd Sunday after Pentecost



First Reading

from *The Four Elements* by John O'Donohue

Fire is often used to portray anger. Anger burns and blazes, it inflames the human heart. But it can also be a subtle presence. Unlike resentment, which points to death, anger points to life. For oppressed people, or for oppressed dimensions within the individual life, the awakening and release of anger can be powerfully liberating. Anger is powerful because it has an immediacy, innocence and action in it. The reason that so much evil and corruption are allowed to destroy so many lives is that people's anger is cleverly managed and quelled into indifference and powerlessness. One of the first targets of prophecy is to locate and kindle this forgotten and neglected anger. Part of the wisdom of living a creative and healing life is to learn the art of using this inner fire well.

Second Reading

Ephesians 4:26 from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

Go ahead and be angry. You do well to be angry—but don't use your anger as fuel for revenge. And don't stay angry. Don't go to bed angry.

Second Reading, part 2

David Whyte in *Consolations*

Anger truly felt at its center is the essential living flame of being fully alive and fully here; it is a quality to be followed to its source, to be prized, to be tended and an invitation to finding a way to bring that source fully into the world through making the mind clearer and more generous, the heart more compassionate and the body larger and strong enough to hold it.

What would Jesus do? This is a common question in the Christian household, and it's often a rhetorical way of preparing our listeners to hear from the Jesus that we've created in our own image. In other words, I am here to tell you that Jesus would definitely, one hundred percent, totally, literally do what I'm doing. "WWJD" is meant to be a discussion ender. Let me say unequivocally, however, that at any given moment I can only speculate on what Jesus might have done, and I really have no idea what he would do.

In the four portraits painted of him in the gospels, we see an individual acting within the full range of human emotion. At times he is filled with joy. Sometimes he weeps. There are times when his heart breaks with compassion. The love he feels for people prompts him to heal the sick and feed the hungry. Other times he is irritated, impatient and frustrated. There are also times when he can only be described as angry.

Last week we talked about the fire of Eros, also known as Life Force, Divine Energy or Holy Spirit. But today I want us to recognize that it is impossible to have a conversation about the fire element without talking about anger. Anger is a piece of the human experience that at times we just don't know what to do with. It is a feeling that we've been trained to reject, and the more we reject it, the deeper it goes into the shadow, only to come out sideways somewhere else. Either it smolders until the pressure builds up and we blow a gasket, or by bottling it up we turn it upon ourselves in the form of depression. And every one of us has had the experience of both.

I've often spoken of the childhood messages I received from my long lineage of English Quakers. There is a reason I keep talking about it. It's like Catholic Guilt but with sugar on top. "Don't be angry!" "Don't be sad!" "You don't hate anyone." "Tell your sister you're sorry." "Don't be cross." "Cheer up." "You don't feel that way." I wish I could have been conversant about the cleansing of the temple when I was six. If I could have proven to my significant adults that Jesus was angry, maybe they could have let me be a little more like Jesus, and I might have avoided a detour or two in my spiritual journey. And then we have the letter from the Apostle Paul to the church at Ephesus where he tells them to "be angry and sin not," implying that anger is indeed not a sin, and that like any valid emotion, one can freely choose how that anger is expressed in ways that are positive and constructive rather than bitter and destructive.

John O'Donohue distinguishes anger from resentment. He says that resentment points to death, and anger points to life. And he speaks of the ways that anger can liberate us from oppression, but in order for that to happen we have to recognize it as the inner fire, one that we can learn to use well. Learning to use anger well To a Quaker this is like a game of Hot Potato.

In the decades since my ordination, if there's one thing I've learned about church it's that it makes for a good anger workshop—a padded cell of sorts where we can work these things out, and it's really successful when we can be stubborn enough to keep loving each other through it. I mean, let's be honest here. Can you name a time when "church" has made you feel angry? Can we talk? Oh, the stories that would pour out of us. It's like saying "Can you name a time when your family has made you feel angry?" (there's the question that oils the machinery).

David Whyte calls anger the "essential living flame of being fully live and fully here; a quality to be followed to its source, to be prized, to be tended." He calls us to find ways to "bring that source fully into the world through making the mind clearer and more generous, the heart more compassionate and the body larger and strong enough to hold it."

When I was a young preacher I could not use my children as illustrations because they were sitting in the front row. But now that they are old enough to handle it, and given the fact that they are 2,500 miles away, I can always take a little license. I've told you before about the strong will of my firstborn, and how when he was a child there was a major challenge just about every day. The test of wills

between us lasted well through his teenage years and found some sort of healthy place in his adulthood, and especially when ten years ago he became a father himself. Such an “aha” moment that was for all of us! Without rubbing it in, I can now gently say, “See what I mean?” But thinking back to some of those blowups that happened when he was seven or eight or nine, those moments where I still had the physical power to contain him, and yet chose to let him fly into that rage within a loving environment, and see him get to that point of clearing, of resolution, of calm—I look at those moments now and see the wisdom that came to all of us in those times. Those are some of the greatest gifts we have in being a family. At the time, I thought I was a failure as a parent. What are we doing wrong that he is so angry? Why can’t he just be nice? Why can’t this be a quieter, more peaceful home? What are people going to think if they hear me yelling in the parsonage? Aren’t I supposed to be more like Jesus?

Likewise, when there is conflict within a community like a church, why can’t everyone just agree? Why can’t people just listen to me and do what I say? What about that time fifteen years ago when someone said something insulting? I’ve never gotten over that. That’s another way of saying—isn’t it?—that I’ve never been able to clear it. And I’ve never been able to clear it because I’ve never let myself truly feel it. It is an inner fire that I have failed to tend. I haven’t let myself bring it fully into the world and to let it clear the channels for a greater compassion in the world. And speaking of the world, how are we supposed to live within this culture of anger that confronts us every time we look at our cell phone? Are we supposed to be sweet and peaceful like this blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus we learned about in Sunday School? Or should we look at injustice and oppression that masquerades as political power, and see it for the den of thieves that it really is? Should we maybe tend this inner fire within us and let it clear when necessary? Should we perhaps just get really honest within this lovely padded cell that we call church, and just love each other through it? What is the state of your essential living flame today?



Jesus out the money changers from the temple