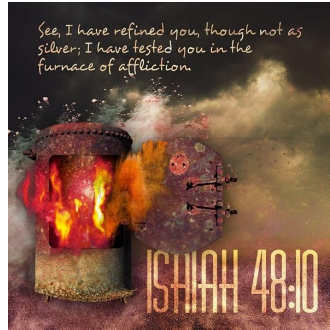


“The Heart of the Matter”

Rev. David Gregory

November 17, 2019

23rd Sunday after Pentecost



First Reading

from *The Four Elements* by John O'Donohue

Fire is an intimate force. Whereas light is very heartening, it remains quite superficial. It touches only the surfaces of things. During daytime, light turns the surface of the world bright and colorful. But then night turns it to darkness. Fire, on the other hand, has the power to penetrate to the very essence of substance. Fire can go to the heart of the matter.

Second Reading, part 1

Isaiah 48:10

See, I have refined you, but not like silver; I have tested you in the furnace of adversity.

Second Reading, part 2

St. Catherine of Siena

You, God, are a fire that always burns without consuming. You are a fire consuming in its heat every compartment of the soul's self-absorbed love. You are a fire lifting all chill and giving all light. In Your light You show me Your truth. You're the light that outshines every Light.

You, God, give the mind's eye Your divine light so completely and excellently. You bring lucidity even to the light of faith. In that faith, I see my soul has life, and in that light, I receive You who are Light itself.

Since the beginning of September we have been taking an elemental journey. As you know, we began with earth, strong enough to support us yet porous enough to receive our ever-deepening roots. And then the water began to flow. Indispensable to our very lives, water signifies the movement of feeling and emotion that makes us fully human. Lately, we've been talking about fire, an energy that resides at the core of our being and doesn't just illuminate; it brings an energy that empowers us in all kinds of ways. Our Thursday evening spiritual practices have had the intention of bringing us into prolonged contact with this divine energy. Many people call it God.

We did not invent this idea of divine energy. It is modeled for us in just about every major religious tradition. At the heart of our tradition is a young rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth, and if we are to take seriously some of what we read about him, we cannot help but notice how the practices of solitude and prayer undergirded everything that he did. Like a Tesla at a charging station, Jesus often went into the wilderness for some quiet, or he'd get into a boat to escape the crowds, or he'd encourage his friends to come away and rest for a while. The Gospel of John with its Olivet discourse provides a window into the very roots of the Christian mystical tradition, something that came to be ignored from the fourth century onward, though it has been present from the beginning and is being discovered in this New Reformation.

As a young teenager, I sat cross-legged on some shag carpet in a youth lounge at the local Methodist church, strumming a guitar, and singing songs like "They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love." It was the early seventies and it was cool to be a Jesus person. I had shoulder-length hair for a while; I wore bell bottoms until they were threadbare. This youth group was all about finding something counter-cultural, experiential. We wanted something real. Along the way, however, there were some grownups who may have grown a little uncomfortable with our innocent and free-wheeling spirituality. I remember being told not to trust in feelings. We were to start with *facts*, and move to faith in those facts. It was fact, faith, and feeling—in that order, except that feeling was not to be trusted at all.

This is the argument for doctrine over experience, something that undergirds most every systematic theology in its attempt to make God into some sort of card catalogue, or even an encyclopedia meant to answer all our questions about God and life. All along, however, there have been mystics like Catherine of Siena from the 14th century who described fiery experiences of the divine that defied all the categories. I cannot recall anything in my earlier seminary experience that allowed for a "fire consuming in its heat every compartment of the soul's self-absorbed love." It would not have been prudent. It might have led to dancing.

I think what attracts me to Celtic forms of spirituality and consciousness is the way in which it returns me to the shag carpet of my youth. I don't think it was any accident that we were sitting on the ground in those days. And I don't think it was wrong that we were looking for something real, something we could feel and experience. Don't get me wrong here. Theology has its place. It is my chosen field. My education, my degrees, are theological. To trace the development of philosophy and thought around human attempts to explain the unexplainable is not only fascinating, it can be life-giving. It has value, but that value is not in the intellect alone. As John O'Donohue puts it, we're talking about an "intimate force." He says that light touches the surfaces of things, while fire has the ability to penetrate to the core of substance.

Facts divorced from feeling might shed some light on a subject, but left to themselves they become superficial. This is why, as the latest Pew Research poll suggests, Christianity—and especially our stream of mainline Protestantism—is in such a free-fall. We spent the better part of the 20th century intellectualizing Jesus until there was nothing left of him; nothing, that is, that we could see or touch or feel. This has created a church devoid of youthful energy while we try and maintain our worn-out

structures and traditions, hoping that if we fix them up, people will begin to see the light and come back. This is the delusion of 21st century American Christianity, and if that is the only thing we're about, then perhaps we should indeed hang it up.

I see something far different, though. I saw it at Stone Soup on Thursday. I see it in yoga every Wednesday. I see it in interfaith meditations and in silent retreats, in experiences of spiritual direction. I get into the wave of a chant when the words become so repetitive that they carry me away, and I see the power of a new birth. It's all about the fire that burns within us but does not consume. We're onto something in this place. I can feel it. We just have to let the refining fire burn off all that is unnecessary.

