

Sermon Series: Connecting With God

Week 3: Reconnecting With the Light

Genesis 1:1-5 John 1:1-5
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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July 12, 2015

In our spiritual quest to better understand and experience what it means to connect with God, we have recently explored reconnecting with the sacredness of the **earth** and all of creation. Last Sunday we delved into reconnecting with **compassion**. As demonstrated by the Good Samaritan, compassion involves the courage to see the suffering of another, the courage to *feel*, and perhaps most importantly the courage to *act*. Compassion involves connecting the heart of your being with the heart of another's being. When we do that, we are connecting with God.

This morning, again using the structure of John Philip Newell's book, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, we move into something much more metaphorical in nature. Just what does it mean to reconnect with the **Light**? Thankfully, the Bible provides a lot of guidance in this area, because it is filled with deeply profound imagery concerning light.

Let's start at the beginning. The opening verses in the Bible from Genesis 1 state:

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind [which can also be translated as "breath" or "spirit"] from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good...

Biblically, all of creation begins with light. Interestingly, this has been confirmed by modern science in the theory known as the Big Bang, stating it was light that burst the universe into being at the beginning of time. **Theologically, it can be stated that light still pulsates at the heart of everything that has been created.** Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Mary Oliver, speaks of "the light at the center of every cell." Newell writes:

This is similar to the vision of the Irish theologian and early Celtic prophet **John Scotus Eriugena** in the ninth century, who said that **the Light of God is the 'Essence of all things.'**

He used the analogy of lines coming out from a single point. [Picture a wagon wheel.] The further out any line moves, the more divergent it appears from the other lines. But when we trace any of the lines back to their source, we find the common point from which all the lines have come.

So it is, he says, with everything that has being. Everything originates in the Light of God. [That implies, therefore] if somehow that Light were extracted from the universe, all things would cease to exist.

That reminds me of one of the definitions that the late Rev. Dr. Harold Hill once shared in one of our adult church school classes. "God is that which without there would be nothing." Without God, without the Light that flows through all things, there would be no life.

Recognizing the Light within all things, including yourself, is another way to acknowledge we are not only made by God, but of God (Julian of Norwich). This is the Light with which we are being called to reconnect. When we do that we connect with God. "Eriugena teaches that because the Light of God is the 'Essence of all things,' **everything should be regarded as a theophany, a showing or revealing of the divine.**" Newell, p. 34. Mary Oliver poetically writes, "It is not hard to understand where God's body is. It is everywhere and everything."

We are being challenged to believe **Divine Light lies at the heart, the core, of within all people. Acknowledging that allows us to recognize that it is a deeper part of our being than any division, like race, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, nationality, even religion.** Here's another implication of this way of understanding. **If Divine Light is within all matter, then it can be found not by looking away from the earth but by looking within everything that emerges from the earth.** That's a very different approach to spirituality, to connecting with God, than most of us grew up understanding.

Let's also look at how this specifically applies to Christianity. In his book, John Philip Newell suggest that when we recognize that the whole of life is suffused with the same Light, we have a better understanding of the meaning of the nativity stories in the Gospels. He writes: "The sacredness of the Christ Child, born of the marriage between heaven and earth, reveals the sacredness of the universe, conceived by the union of spirit and matter."

Scottish pastor George MacLeod, the founder of the Iona Community in Scotland in 1938, once declared that the small ancient Celtic island of **Iona** is "**a thin place where only tissue paper separates the material from the spiritual.**" We can extend and expand that to realize any place, at any time, can be a 'thin place,' where we can recognize **at the heart of the physical is the spiritual.** Newell writes;

Hidden within the mundane is the Divine. What we do to matter, therefore – whether that be the matter of another's body in relationship, or the matter of the earth's body and how we handle its sacred resources, or the matter of the body politic and how we honor the holy sovereignty of one another's nationhood – all of this relates to the Light that we worship in the Christ Child.

Reflect upon those times and places that enabled you to bring into focus the Light at the heart of life. For poet Mary Oliver it is when she is in the woods. Perhaps that's one place where you find it as well. From her poem entitled, **When I Am Among the Trees:**

Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.

And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine.

It is powerful and transformative to recognize why we have come into the world, "to be filled with light, and to shine." Newell reflects upon the implications this way:

It means knowing that we have a sibling relationship with everything that exists and that the Light that we glimpse in the trees, in the creatures, in the eyes of another, is the Light that is also within us.

Do we know that we are bearers of this unspeakably beautiful Light? Do we know that this Light at the heart of our being is for one another and for the world? To be bearers of Light – which is pure gift and not of our own doing – means that we are made to shine.

As we heard the children sing "This Little Light Of Mine" a few moments ago, as well as reflected in our Gospel reading from Matthew 5, "You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works." Sometimes, however, that can be threatening to others, especially those in power. Newell reflects, "Those who cling to power for their own sake, or for the sake only of their chosen communities and their special interest groups, do not want everyone to shine. **The shadow side of power is a determination that only some should shine**, and that only some should be considered worthy."

Have we not recognized that happening right before our eyes in the recent responses to marriage equality, the taking down of the Confederate battle flag, and the refusal to comply with the Oklahoma Supreme Court to remove the Ten Commandments monument from our own state capital ground? Those in power often see those who identify with the oppressed as a threat to their own self-interests. Just look at how things turned out for Jesus.

Saying that, we also know there is a relationship between Light and reconciliation. Poetically stated by Newell, "There is an essential link between growing in an awareness of the Light that has been showered upon all things and the work of coming back into relationship with all things. 'To see your face,' says Jacob to Esau, 'is like seeing the face of God.' (Genesis 33:10). **To be truly reconciled is to see the Light at the heart of the other.**" Look around you at those in this sanctuary today. Look for the Light that is at the heart of each and every person, including within yourself.

Fully aware of the opening words found in Genesis 1, the author of the Gospel of John mimics:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. **What has***

come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

From a Christian perspective, that which was recognized in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth was a new and profound revelation and understanding of the nature and character of God. That revelation brought life. It is that life that was, and is, the light of all people.

You and I, and all of creation, are bearers of, an embodiment of, Divine Light. We are also called to bear witness to that Light in and through the living of our own lives. In other words, through our very being we can act as a 'thin place' that reveals the connection between the material and the spiritual.

Using Newell's concluding words, here's your and my challenge for this coming week, "...pay attention, see the Light that is at the heart of this moment and every moment, know that we are full of Light and can shine..." Connect with God in and through a reconnection with the Light.

Amen

Resources:

John Philip Newell, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, Skylight Paths Publishing, Woodstock, Vermont, 2014