

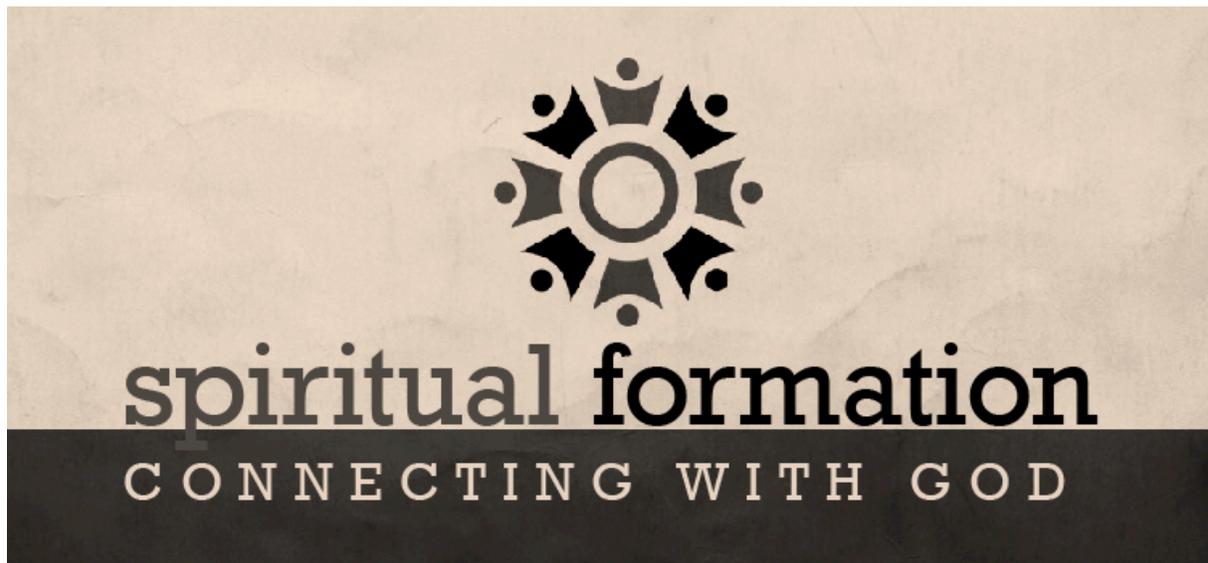


SERMON SERIES:



CONNECTING WITH GOD

AND: "THE CELTIC WAY: THE INTERRELATEDNESS OF
THE SPIRITUAL AND THE MATERIAL"



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SERMON SERIES:
CONNECTING
WITH GOD



REV. TODD FREEMAN, 2015

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THE CELTIC WAY: THE INTERRELATEDNESS OF
THE SPIRITUAL AND THE MATERIAL

Sermon Titles are from the chapter titles in the book:

The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings

By John Philip Newell

SkyLight Paths Publishing, 2014



Sermon Series : Connecting With God

Week 1: Reconnecting With the Earth

John 3:1-3 Genesis 1:1-5, 26-27, 31
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
June 21, 2015

For quite some time, now, I've been making references in sermons to moving beyond a primarily intellectual exploration of new progressive ways of understanding Christian theology and biblical interpretation. Much of that work over the past decade or so has involved an in-depth look at the research by folks at the Jesus Seminar, like the work of Jon Dominic Crossan, John Shelby Spong, and Marcus Borg. It also included works by others like the *Living the Questions* church school curriculum that we have used here, and by current authors like Robin Meyers, Phyllis Tickle, Brian McLaren, Harvey Cox, and perhaps my favorite book on where progressives perceive organized religion is heading, *Christianity After Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, by Diana Butler Bass.

In the sermon on the Sunday before beginning my sabbatical, I stated, **"While not abandoning that intellectual endeavor, it is my intention to try to get us, as College Hill Presbyterian Church, to focus a bit more on the spiritual side of our individual and collective journey of faith." That starts in earnest today.** For the next 8 Sundays, it is my intention to present a sermon series I've entitled, "Connecting With God."

For structure, I'll be using a different chapter title each week from the book ***The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, by John Philip Newell.** I encourage you to buy and read this remarkable book. Newell, an ordained Church of Scotland minister, is a former Warden of Iona Abbey in Scotland, where I just spent a week during my sabbatical. He has also led many spiritual retreats during summers at Casa del Sol at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico. Newell is internationally acclaimed for his work in the field of Celtic spirituality, teaching and preaching on themes related to the sacredness of the earth and the oneness of the human soul.

It is my hope that through this sermon series each of us will have a better understanding of what it means to connect with God – which is simply another way to define the term **spiritual formation**. Newell proposes that we can move toward that connection not by simply searching for something from without ourselves, but rather **reaching deep within to reconnect with the Sacred Presence that dwells within all creation**. We accomplish that, he suggests, by reconnecting: reconnecting with the earth, which is the topic of this sermon, and reconnecting with compassion, with the Light, with the journey, with spiritual practice, with nonviolence, with the unconscious, and reconnecting with love.

A rich spiritual life that becomes a vital element to your and my journey of faith might just begin by internalizing a teaching about creation from **Julian of Norwich**, a 14th century Christian mystic in England. She radically proclaimed that **we are not just made by God, we are made of God**. Imagine the implications of what that means. In part, it means that **the very love, wisdom and creativity of God are embedded deep within the heart of our being**.

This morning's Gospel reading includes the familiar passage from John 3 where Jesus states that recognizing and participating in the kingdom of God requires that we be "**born anew**," or more commonly rendered, "born again." In order to avoid that often-abused phrase, most progressives prefer the NRSV translation, "born from above." But Newell reminds us, "**This phrase has been hijacked by religious fundamentalism** [and I would add that to an extent by traditional Christianity itself] to give the impression that we need to become something other than ourselves." **It implies that we need to turn from what is deepest within us, including a denial of our human nature, because they believe that at our very core we are utterly sinful.**

As theologians and everyday people in church pews are reevaluating this claim of total depravity, more and more people are rejecting this historical assumption, and many have decided to leave organized religion altogether. That is why I want us to explore a very different approach and understanding of our human nature, which we must remember has been created by God.

Perhaps, that which is deepest within each human life isn't sinfulness, but rather the Sacred Presence of God. It's stated this way in today's Affirmation of Faith, as found in the *Iona Abbey Worship Book*, "With people everywhere: **we affirm God's goodness at the heart of humanity, planted more deeply than all that is wrong.**"

This reemergence of the Divine from deep within us is something we cannot create on our own, but is rather something – by God's grace – we let spring forth and be reborn anew in our lives. What a wonderful twist on that old biblical phrase to be born again! This approach also helps explain the rather strange title of Newell's book, *The Rebirthing of God*. As he writes in his Introduction, "We can be part of midwifing new holy births in the world." Newell suggests that the first step, and one of primary features of rebirthing, is a **coming back into relationship with the sacredness of the earth**. Eco-theologian Thomas Berry writes, "We need to move from a spirituality of alienation from the natural world to **a spirituality of intimacy with the natural world.**"

As you may have heard in the news this week, this is a similar position taken by **Pope Francis** upon the release of his encyclical entitled, "On Care For Our Common Home." I read a good portion of it online yesterday. It's wonderful. From a section called, "The Sacramental Signs and the Celebration of Rest," the Pope writes from deeply moral and ethical perspective:

233. The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things.

Indeed, one of the things we learned in our adult church school class last just over a year ago when we studied the *Living the Questions* curriculum entitled, "Painting the Stars: Science, Religion and an Evolving Faith," is that **everything in the universe is actually related to everything else in the universe. That means that the earth's well-being is an essential part of our well-being.**

The Creation Story found in the first chapter in the Book of Genesis, today's Old Testament reading, clearly declares that all of creation is good, and that we have been made in the image and likeness of God. That's why Julian of Norwich reminds us that we are made "of God," not just "by God." So, **with all of creation made from that same source, that same**

Light, it's understandable that deep within there is a desire to move back into relationship with everything else that is of God.

Reconnecting with the sacredness of the earth, therefore, is a good first step in a deeper understanding of connecting with God. I experienced that spiritual connection with the earth during my sabbatical, especially at both Brigit's Garden and Glendalough in Ireland, and during my pilgrimage around the island of Iona, Scotland. And I'm serious when I tell you that I also experience that spiritual connection with sacredness at Angel Acres. That, by the way, is the name I call the property and home where I live north of town. Newell put it poetically this way: we must remind ourselves that "we are living in the cathedral of earth, sea, and sky."

Perhaps that helps explain my own spiritual connection with the study of geology. Perhaps you, too, somehow recognize a Sacred Presence when looking at and touching the structure, substance, and processes of the earth. And like so many people, perhaps you are one of those who find a deep sense of peace, as well as a sense of excitement and adventure when out in nature, or simply driving in the country.

The earth instinctively knows what it means to move in relationship with the universe. It's been doing that for 4.5 billion years. And this is where Newell diverges from some traditional Christian thought. He states:

We are not an exception to the cosmos. We are not an addendum. **Humanity has emerged from within the matter of the cosmos.** We express the nature of the universe. What is deepest in us – our longing for relationship – reveals a yearning that is within all things.

Yes, we may be a unique expression of that longing – just as everything else uniquely reveals some aspect of reality – but what we manifest is a yearning that emerges from the very heart of creation.

We find in the Gospel of John an understanding that **Jesus himself is the memory of what we have forgotten – that everything moves in relationship.** Newell explains, "Jesus comes to lead us not into a detachment from the earth or a separation from the other species and peoples of the world, but into a dance that will bring us back into relationship with all things... We want to touch again what is deepest in us and in our traditions and to reconnect with the One who is our source. For in touching the innermost strands of our being, we will be born anew."

Recognizing the sacredness in other people and in the earth itself, therefore, has profound implications in how we see and treat one another, and for how we relate to the resources and creatures of the earth. Our first step is to recognize the sacredness in all of creation. Perhaps the next step is to have the courage to protect that sacredness.

The spirituality embedded in the religious life of indigenous peoples throughout time and place have known this more fully than in what we call Western Christianity. So if we truly desire to connect with God, **we need to be born anew in way that leads us to reconnect with the earth.** I encourage you to look for ways to do so this week.

Amen

Resources:

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

Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care For Our Common Home, Encyclical Letter, May 24, 2015.*

Sermon Series: **Connecting With God**
 Week 2: **Reconnecting With Compassion**

Luke 10:25-37 Colossians 3:12-16 Rev. Todd B. Freeman
 College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa July 5, 2015

During this past week there have been countless reactions and responses to the Supreme Court's ruling that extended the right to marry to all persons in this country, regardless of sexual orientation. Perhaps you noticed the Religion section in yesterday's *Tulsa World*, or on today's front page, that included responses from several religious leaders here in Tulsa. I give credit to *World Religion Writer*, Bill Sherman, for including such a wide spectrum of viewpoints – from the far right to the far left.

Religious liberty in this country thankfully guarantees the right of every American to their own beliefs. Most likely, however, you recognized **a distinct lack of compassion in many of those responses to marriage equality.**

Earlier this week, Marilyn Hill drew my attention to a blog entitled, "Stuff That Needs To Be Said," by **John Pavlovitz**. Concerning the marriage equality issue, he reflected on the particular responses by so many who identify themselves as Christians. In a July 1 post entitled, "**6 Ways Christians Lost This Week**," he writes:

So many professed followers of Jesus spent the last week on the attack, desperately fighting a battle long after it had already been decided. Instead of simply looking for ways to personally affirm our faith in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision, too many of us frankly just lost it. We spit out vitriol and we cursed strangers and we treated others with contempt. Our response to the LGBT community and those who support them wasn't compassion and decency and peacemaking, it was sour grapes, damnation, and middle finger.

Here are the 6 ways Pavlovitz claims Christians lost this past week.

1. We lost the chance to be loving.
2. We lost the chance to be good neighbors.
3. We lost the chance to be good Samaritans.
4. We lost the opportunity to show how big God is.
5. We lost the chance to reflect Christ.
6. We lost people.

He concludes, "This stuff should simply break our collective hearts. All of us who claim Christ need to do some honest, invasive personal reflection. Regardless of our feelings about the Supreme Court's decision, it's clear that Christians lost far more valuable things than a 5 to 4 vote this week; things that we better fight like Hell to get back." (I love when I quote other people so I can say things that I wouldn't normally say.)

In making reference to the familiar parable known the Good Samaritan, today's Gospel reading, we see that it is indeed a reflection of and instructive to our response to those who are hurting. And I would add, those who have been oppressed. Interestingly, it's now many on the far right who are feeling hurt and oppressed. But the response of far too many Christians this past week was to not recognize those who have been hurt, nor to move toward them with gentleness and mercy, seeking ways to help bind their wounds – many of which they caused. It's true, many walked passed those who were down, some kicking them hard on the way by. In other words, there was a lack of compassion. **I continue to wonder when holding true to one's convictions crosses the line into spiritual arrogance.**

The word *compassion* literally means, "to suffer with," or "being with suffering." The very opposite of compassion, then, indicates either an inability to recognize the suffering of others, or to see it and not care, or to care but then not do anything to help alleviate the suffering. The **Good Samaritan**, we learn, did all three. **His compassion gave him the courage to see, the courage to feel, and the courage to act. When we reconnect with our ability to be compassionate, we are connecting with God. That's a crucial element of our spiritual growth.**

In monitoring the responses on both sides of the marriage equality issue, for example, I have noticed that it is not only certain evangelicals and conservative traditionalists who are not responding with compassion, like a good neighbor. A lack of empathy and compassion, even to the point of condemnation by some, seems to have been the go-to response by many on both sides of this debate.

Jesus has not made this easy for any of us. Perhaps the point of this parable is to show that we all have a problem showing compassion – suffering with – those with whom we disagree. It's an old problem that each and every one of us has when we pick and choose those who we think deserve our compassion. Here's Jesus' response: In order to be a good neighbor we must extend and demonstrate mercy and compassion to anyone and everyone. I don't know about you, but it makes me uncomfortable when Jesus has us look in the mirror. For when we're honest with ourselves we don't always like what's staring back at us in the face.

John Philip Newell, in his book that I'm using as a guide to this sermon series on connecting with God, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, states: "**Compassion is about making the connection between the heart of my being and the heart of yours, and following that connection.**" Admittedly, there are some people with whom many of us would just as soon not make a connection. Genuine compassion, however, would have us reconsider that stance.

Perhaps you've heard of **Aung San Suu Kyi** (b. 1945). She won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 for her work in leading a nonviolent movement for democracy in Burma, which is now called Myanmar, located in Southeast Asia. Referred to by some as Burma's Gandhi, she spent most of 1989 thru 2010 under house arrest.

Suu Kyi wrote a book in 2008 entitled, *The Voice of Hope*. She describes the movement for change that she is leading as a "revolution of the spirit." She follows a threefold path of compassion that is directly related to her Buddhist inheritance and practice. I alluded to it earlier in this sermon. **She describes compassion this way, "The courage to see. The courage to feel. And the courage to act."** As we have seen, this describes the Good Samaritan to a tee. Newell writes, "To live compassionately, she says, is to courageously see the connection between ourselves and those who suffer."

We are called, therefore, to foster and nurture a way of seeing that recognizes the Sacred Presence of the Divine in others, and in all of creation for that matter.

Suu Kyi writes in her 1995 book, *Freedom From Fear*, "To live the full life one must have the courage to bear the responsibility of the needs of others – one must *want* to bear this responsibility." **Unfortunately, many have become accustomed to seeing compassion as a duty, almost a burden. However, wanting to bear responsibility for the needs of others can be a blessing in that it can free us from a narrow self-interest. This is what differentiated the Good Samaritan from those who passed by on the other side. It was not a matter of hatred, it was a matter of self-interest. Perhaps that helps explain many of the reactions and responses to marriage equality – not hatred, but preservation of self-interest.** Newell writes:

The great challenge is to see our connection with those who seem different from us – the nation that does not share our vision, the people whose lifestyle we cannot understand, the individuals or groups who threaten us. Part of Suu Kyi's stature of spirit is her refusal to demonize those who have wronged her.

This past week has served as a sad reminder that those on both sides of the social and theological spectrum can fall into the trap of demonizing those with whom we disagree, especially those who have indeed wronged us. This is why we are called to be compassionate.

When we realize that we are not only made *by* God but made *of* God (Julian of Norwich) we can understand that compassion is at the heart of our being, "waiting to flow again for one another and for those who suffer. Part of the rebirthing of God in our lives and our world is allowing these depths [of compassion] to flow."

The ability to see and feel compassion for others, however, isn't the end point. Rather, that's what needed to lead us to the next step: to show and translate compassion into action. Yet as we saw in the parable of the Good Samaritan, compassionate action can be **costly**. Granted, the complexity of needs in the world can overwhelm us into inaction. But we need to start somewhere, perhaps simply by doing what we believe is the next right thing to do. Our responsibility then, is to do what we can, to have the courage to see, the courage to feel, the courage to act.

Newell concludes his chapter on connecting with God in and through a reconnection with compassion this way:

Each one of us has a critical role to play in our families, our personal relationships, our religious communities. No one else can play that role of compassion for us. Do we know this, that each one of us is essential?

That's our challenge for this week. A couple of weeks ago I encouraged you to find ways to reconnect with the sacredness of the earth. Continue to do that. This week, I also encourage you to find ways to reconnect with compassion. With the grace of God, we can do it!

Amen

Resources:

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

Sermon Series: Connecting With God

Week 3: Reconnecting With the Light

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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

Sermon Series: Connecting With God

Week 4: Reconnecting With the Journey

Genesis 12:1-9 Exodus 13:17-22
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
July 19, 2015

Before I get into this sermon I want to begin with a shout out to Oral Roberts University! I know that many of you may now be thinking, “Who are you, and what have you done with our pastor?” Let me explain. Traditional Christianity – and evangelical Christianity, in particular – has historically taught that **the place we listen for the Word of God is in the Scriptures**. One of the hallmarks of **Celtic spirituality**, however, is that **the Word of God can also be heard in and through creation**. That leads to an understanding that the mystery of God is inseparably linked to the mystery of creation.

This is one of the areas that we’ve recently emphasized in this current sermon series dealing with the spirituality of connecting with God. ‘Reconnecting with the Earth’ was the theme of the first sermon in this series last month. We discussed how **we can connect and learn of God not by looking away from ourselves and away from creation, but by searching deep within all that has life**.

So you can imagine my excitement and shock when I read in the Religion section of yesterday’s *Tulsa World*, “‘Hearing God’s Voice in Nature’ will be the theme of the annual American Scientific Affiliation meeting at Oral Roberts University next weekend.” Upon reflection, I have a confession to make. My surprise at ORU hosting this event has less to do with the actual work that goes on at ORU, and more with my preconceived notions of what goes on at ORU. So I apologize.

In recent weeks we’ve also explored connecting with God in and through reconnecting with compassion, and reconnecting with the Light, that Divine spark that dwells deep within all people. Today’s focus is **reconnecting with the journey**.

Have you ever noticed the Bible is all about the journey? There are specific journeys, like the two we heard this morning from the Old Testament. We learn that Abraham and Sarah’s faithfulness was not based on a set of particular religious beliefs, but rather on their trust in God, to follow where they discerned God was leading them. (Genesis 12). After being freed from captivity in Egypt, we learn that the wilderness journey of Moses and the Hebrew people included the continual presence of God, as poetically described as a “pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.” (Exodus 13).

The entirety of the Scriptures testify to a journey toward God, away from God, and a return to God.

- It’s a journey from rebellion to faithfulness.
- It’s a journey from captivity to freedom.
- It’s a journey from oppression to justice.
- It’s a journey from fear to peace.

- It's a journey from sin to redemption.
- It's a journey from the beginning of life to death to life beyond this life.

You and I are part of that cosmic journey. And perhaps the greatest of all of God's promises found in scripture is that God is with us on that journey. And, nothing in all creation can ever separate us from the love of God.

This was eloquently stated by the **Rev. Dr. Robert Ball**, a former pastor here in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery at Bristow Presbyterian Church and at John Knox Presbyterian Church here in Tulsa. He happens to be present with us in our sanctuary this morning. In his very important book, which I highly recommend (and I say that not just because he's sitting right over there), entitled, ***Being With: Maybe This Is What Life Is All About***, published just last year, he writes:

After an extended examination of scripture, I'm convinced that **the promise to 'be with' us is the ultimate and most consistent promise the God of the Bible gives to human beings.**

Both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, from beginning to end, are filled with precisely this meaning and, in many instances, with these exact words, 'I will be with you.' I'm now convinced that 'being with' represents the essential core of God's ultimate promise to his people, as well as expressing God's eternal purpose for us.

Earlier in my own pastoral ministry I taught Confirmation Class to church middle schoolers. The curriculum I used, from the Presbyterian Church (USA), was entitled, *Journeys of Faith*. The overall approach is described as follows:

The journey of faith on which Christians embark is not a matter of following the tracks of those who have gone before. **The life of faith is better understood as a journey into new territory in a new time and among new circumstances**, yet one guided by the experiences of others who journeyed in particular times, places, and settings in the past."

I wholeheartedly agree with this approach. For are we not always being nudged to move on to new horizons, often into the unknown? We, no less than Abraham and Sarah, are often called to leave behind certain comfortable old ways and understandings. Abraham and Sarah never knew where the road of life would take them but they believed that God was present and active in their lives. Their story reveals to us that **a life of faith is grounded in the journey itself, not in the arrival at a particular destination.**

Precisely because our destination in this life is unknown, we have faith – the assurance that God is *with* us and *for* us as we travel along this often unpredictable journey. I like the analogy that life is like being on a journey without maps. There's a fancy word for all of this: **peregrination**. In his 2014 book, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, **John Philip Newell**, a former Dean of Iona Abbey in Scotland writes:

The practice of peregrination was strong in the Celtic world. It often involved setting sail from one's homeland as a pilgrim, from what was known and comfortable into what was unknown and challenging... leaving the familiar in order to experience new birth, dying to the boundaries and securities of home to be alive to what one had never imagined before.

We, too, are pilgrims. I find this to be an apt description of the **journey from traditional Christianity to progressive Christianity**. Who among us here at College Hill hasn't been on an inward pilgrimage and journey, where we have left the familiarity and security of what the Church has traditionally taught, and sometimes told us to believe, to new understandings of God and ourselves?

English Benedictine monk, **Father Bede Griffiths** (1906-1993), talked about the **fossilization of Western Christianity**. As Newell explains, "[He believed] it had become hardened, stuck both doctrinally and ritually. It was not living and unfolding like the universe, forever seeking new expression and embodiment through relationship." **Christianity does indeed get trapped by some in a sense of infallibility and unchangeable dogma.**

"One of the laws of the universe," writes Newell, "is that if something is not unfolding, it is dying. If it is not sprouting in new directions, it is decaying." Perhaps that is becoming true of the religious practices and beliefs in which many of us were raised. Yes, traditional Christianity has had a tendency to absolutize our religion. Without evolving, many no longer view organized religion as a road sign that points beyond itself toward God, but as a stop sign. It has become the destination, the end, in and of itself. This isn't healthy.

A lifelong journey, however, inherently involves picking up new things along the way while leaving some old things behind. Last month, upon the return from my faith-energizing 6-week sabbatical, I shared with you the **pilgrimage** I took around the small ancient Celtic island of **Iona**, Scotland. One of the stops along the way might relate directly to your own journey of life and faith – a journey of connection with God. You may remember me telling you about **St. Columba's Bay**, where tradition says Irish monk Columba landed after his journey from Ireland to Scotland in 563 CE. It was at this location, before heading back to our own homeland, that we were asked to consider the turning points in our own life. Let me share again the **guided meditation** at St. Columba's Bay. I encourage you to personalize it in connection with your own journey of faith. You may, if you wish, close your eyes.

Picture yourself standing at the rocky shoreline of a beautiful isolated bay. You are not alone, as others have journeyed with you.

As you listen to the crashing surf, reflect upon the things that you feel may be holding you back from making a fresh start, or that weigh you down as you try to journey onward in life.

Now pick up one of the smooth rounded stones on the beach and walk to the water line. This stone is symbolic of that which you would wish to let go of – **something you need to leave behind and not take home with you.**

It could be a particular unhealthy behavior or attitude in your life; it could be an old hurt, grudge or resentment;

it could be a regret or failure;
it could be a particular unhelpful belief or understanding of the nature and character of God;
it could be anything.

Now with all your might cast this rock into the sea. Say to yourself, “**No more will this prevent my journey into well-being.**”

As you turn away, pick up a second stone to keep as a sign of a new direction, new beginnings, or new commitment that you hope to move towards.

Together, let us begin our return journey home.

I shared with you a few weeks ago that I keep the second stone that I picked up on St. Columba's Bay here on the pulpit. I do so for a very important, and personal reason. It reminds me of the new sense of direction in my own life and ministry. One of the things I decided to leave behind was fear, including the fear of not knowing enough, of not measuring up as your pastor. It may seem like a silly fear, but it's one that many (if not most) pastors have. But as we have been learning recently, we must trust that we are loved and accepted as we are, which this congregation does a remarkable job doing. It makes all the difference. And you, too, are part of this rock – as a remembrance to me.

As you and I seek to connect with God, remember that God is always with us as we reconnect with our journey through life and faith. And thank goodness, that's often together.

Amen.

Resources:

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

Sermon Series: Connecting With God

Week 5: Reconnecting With Spiritual Practice

Mark 1:35 Matthew 14:24 Luke 5:15-16; 6:12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
July 26, 2015

Your personal understanding of what it means to connect with God is a vital part of your journey of life and faith. Throughout this sermon series, we've been exploring – and hopefully broadening – our understand of the term 'spirituality' and what it means to connect with God. I'll save a review for an upcoming sermon, because I want to get right into this morning's topic: connecting with God by reconnecting with spiritual practice.

What do you think of when you hear the term 'spiritual practice,' or 'spiritual disciplines'? As good and faithful Presbyterians, we probably think first of the usual: prayer and Bible study. But you may be surprised to learn that our own Presbyterian *Book of Order* broadens that understanding by mentioning that spiritual practice also involves our personal discipleship in response to God's love and grace. It suggests we do that on Sunday mornings, for example, through:

- participation in public worship,
- engagement in ministries of witness, service, and compassion,
- activities that contribute to spiritual re-creation and rest from daily occupation.

Since the practice of prayer is brought up perhaps most often when thinking about connecting with God by reconnecting with spiritual practice, I want to focus on that for just a moment. I shared several scripture passages from the Gospels that reflect how important it was to Jesus to take a break from ministry, go off by himself alone, and pray. We learn, and many of us have experienced, that **ministry without prayer can lead to burnout and the loss of a grounded sense of purpose. Yet, prayer without ministry is simply unbiblical.** Here's what our *Book of Order* says about prayer.

W-5.4000 Prayer in Personal Worship

W-5.4001 **Prayer**

Prayer is a conscious opening of the self to God, who initiates communion and communication with us.

Prayer is receiving and responding, speaking and listening, waiting and acting in the presence of God. In prayer we respond to God in adoration, in thanksgiving, in confession, in supplication, in intercession, and in self-dedication. (W-2.1000)

It continues with what I find to be a very helpful list of ways our prayers can be expressed. Listen carefully.

W-5.4002 **Expressing Prayer**

Prayer in personal worship may be expressed in various ways.

One may engage in conscious conversation with God, putting into words one's joys and concerns, fears and hopes, needs and longings in life.

One may wait upon God in attentive and expectant silence.

One may meditate upon God's gifts, God's actions, God's Word, and God's character.

One may contemplate God, moving beyond words and thoughts to communion of one's spirit with the Spirit of God.

One may draw near to God in solitude.

One may pray in tongues as a personal and private discipline.

One may take on an individual discipline of enacted prayer through dance, physical exercise, music, or other expressive activity as a response to grace.

One may enact prayer as a public witness through keeping a vigil, through deeds of social responsibility or protest, or through symbolic acts of disciplined service.

One may take on the discipline of holding before God the people, transactions, and events of daily life in the world.

One may enter into prayer covenants or engage in the regular discipline of shared prayer.

The Christian is called to a life of constant prayer, of "prayer without ceasing."
(Rom. 12:12; 1 Thess. 5:17)

Hopefully this has helped expand and broaden your own understanding of what it means to pray. Take special notice of how prayer can be expressed in and through our actions and attitudes. Words aren't always necessary. Expressions of prayer can also be enacted in physical things like dance, exercise, and music. I think they may be hinting at yoga here, as well. And did you pick up on the words "meditate" and "contemplate." Now there's something we don't talk near enough about as Presbyterians. **I may be wrong, but sometimes I think that a congregation like ours does a better job with the action side of spirituality than the contemplative side.** So let's take a look at that.

John Philip Newell, in his book that I'm using as a primary reference for this sermon series, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, introduces us to **Thomas Merton** (1915-1968). Merton was a "great modern Christian prophet of restoring balance through the disciplines of spiritual practice." As a Trappist monk, he was not calling us to a monastic life. Rather, he was "inviting us all into what he called a '**contemplative orientation**' to life." Newell reflects, "Regardless of our particular vocation, age, stage of life, marital status, and family commitments, **we are invited to find balance – between being and doing, between inner awareness and outward engagement** – that will lead to a fuller fruiting of our lives and relationships." The key phrase in that statement is one that can never be emphasized enough: finding balance in life.

Merton believed, as he shared in this 1973 book entitled, *Contemplative Prayer*, **that spiritual practice is not a seeking "to know about God" but "to know God."** Newell writes:

Western Christianity has focused its attention not on spiritual practice but on spiritual belief. It has confused faith with a set of propositional truths about the Divine, rather than a personal experience of the Divine that could be undergirded and sustained by particular practices and disciplines.

...As Merton says, **spiritual practice is not about an idea or concept of God. It is about seeking the experience of presence.**

One of the many things I and others are learning about the wonderful tradition known as Celtic spirituality, is to **see God not so much as an Almighty Divine Being out there somewhere, but as a Sacred Presence that can be experienced in and through all things!** And that begins by recognizing and acknowledging that what is deepest in us is of God. Newell writes:

[Merton emphasizes that] in spiritual practice we return to this deepest center. In meditation, he says, we penetrate the innermost ground of our life. This allows us to **find our true meaning not from the outside, he says, but from within.** It means that we identify ourselves not in terms of social status, race, religion, or sexual orientation but by our truest identity in the very ground of our being.

Do we dare claim that divinity can be found from within, as well as found from without? I'm finally starting to believe that we can.

Along those lines, there is a particular spiritual discipline in which you may not be familiar. It's called '**mindfulness.**' You will find a wealth of information about this by googling "mindfulness." Here's some of what I've found. In a blog by Zachary H. Avery, entitled, "Consciously Embracing What Is: The Path of Presence & Mindfulness," he writes:

Our fast-paced, multitasking, instant messaging, drive through, fast track, 24/7, tweeting, iEverything, microwaving society has lost (or perhaps, forgotten) some things. One of these things that we've forgotten is how to live present in each moment. You see, Buddha said, "The secret of health for both mind and body is not to mourn for the past, worry about the future, or anticipate troubles, but to live in the present moment wisely and earnestly."

Practicing mindfulness, being present, and living in the moment are all attributes recommended by coaches, psychologists, and spiritual teachers alike. Wikipedia defines mindfulness as **the intentional, accepting and non-judgmental focus of one's attention on the emotions, thoughts, and sensations occurring in the present moment.**

Doctor Herbert Benson (author of the infamous book *The Relaxation Response*) adds, "**Mindfulness is the practice of learning to pay attention to what is happening to you from moment to moment. To be mindful, you must slow down, do one activity at a time, and bring your full awareness to both the activity at hand and to your inner experience of it.**"

Rather than being intentionally aware of what's happening in front of and inside of us, we constantly turn to phones, computers, and TVs that distract us from the here and now.

...When we embrace mindfulness, the world opens up to us. We're suddenly able to see beauty and grace in ways that we've previously overlooked or taken for granted. The normal, boring, mundane, and common suddenly becomes infused with life and brilliance. And, perhaps best of all, we find **peace**. **Lao Tsu said thousands of years ago, "If you are depressed, you are living in the past. If you are anxious, you are living in the future. If you are at peace, you are living in the present."** You see, peace is one thing that money, the Internet, smart phones, and social media can't give us. It's something that our society is so hungry for (hence the explosion in practices such as yoga and meditation).

Being fully present in the world in which you and I live, therefore, is a spiritual discipline unto itself. The present moment is underrated. It sounds so ordinary, but we spend so little time in it.

For instance, how many of you are already wondering when this sermon will end; thinking about what you are going to do after the service later this afternoon; reflecting on something that happened to you earlier this week or just this morning; thinking about how badly you want to check your cell phone right now; or any number of countless distractions running through your mind at this very moment?

Just yesterday morning, I took a break from writing this sermon and walked down to my pond with my dog, Jack. I realized how my monkey mind was juggling so many thoughts all at the same time. Like, when will I mow the grass, what will I fix for lunch, how I was going to conclude my sermon? I wasn't really seeing the things right in front of my face. When I realized what I was doing I chose to refocus my attention to the present moment.

At once, I heard birds and insects and the wind rustling the leaves that I hadn't heard a moment earlier. I noticed hundreds of dragonflies hovering above the surface of the water. I saw the magnificent beauty of the lush trees that surrounded me. It was indeed an experience of sensing God's presence. And it brought me peace.

So remember, spiritual practice doesn't always involve bowing your head and holding your hands together in prayer, nor just attending worship and reading the Bible, nor just burning incense and sitting crosslegged on the floor. **Do whatever works for you in order to sense the presence of God in your midst. But you must be intentional about it.**

And I encourage you to explore mindfulness, the practice of being present in body, mind and spirit in the present moment. Try it for just 10 minutes a day and see what happens.

Amen.

Resources:

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

Sermon Series: Connecting With God

Week 6: Reconnecting With Nonviolence

Matthew 5:9; 26:47-56 Psalm 85:8-13
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
August 2, 2015

This morning we are going to explore yet another way to connect with God, a way to sense the Presence of the Sacred in our midst. This time, it's in and through a reconnection with an attitude and practice of nonviolence. That's something that is near and dear to most of our hearts, and own model of ministry.

Deeply intertwined with nonviolence is the matter of being a peacemaker. In the section of the Gospel of Matthew known as the Sermon on the Mount, and in particular the opening verses of chapter 5 called The Beatitudes, Jesus proclaims, **"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God"** (Matt. 5:9). The question we face, then, is **what does it mean to be a peacemaker?** What does that look like for you as an individual – in your home and workplace? For us as a congregation? For us as Christians? Do I dare ask, for us as a nation?

Have you noticed, however, that you can't go very far down the road of talking about peace and nonviolence without entering the realm of politics? That includes issues from military intervention in other countries to gun violence prevention in our own communities. Even though answers are often complex, we are called by God, nonetheless, to peacemaking through nonviolence. So within our own little world that you and I live in daily we must never stop striving for and working toward an approach to life and creation itself that is nonviolent.

For a majority of us, that most likely pertains more specifically to verbal, psychological, and spiritual violence, than it does to physical violence. We are all probably guiltier of it than we realize. **A commitment to peacemaking through nonviolent means becomes, in fact, a vital part of our own spirituality and spiritual growth. Why? Because attitudes and acts of nonviolence connect us with the very heart of God that dwells deep within the core of our own being, and the core of all being.**

Interestingly, one of the persons hailed as the twentieth century's most Christ-like figure was **Mahatma Gandhi** of India. He, of course, wasn't a Christian, but a Hindu. Gandhi even displayed a picture of Jesus with an inscription below that read, "He is our Peace." And as Gandhi used to say, if Christians had actually done what Jesus taught us to do – namely, love our enemy – the world would long ago have been transformed. He strongly believed that an eye for an eye would only make the whole world blind. **So we, as Gandhi suggested, must turn our belief in Jesus into following the ways of Jesus. In other words, to turn our creeds back into deeds.**

John Philip Newell, in his book I have been using as a guide in this sermon series, *The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings*, puts it this way:

The great offering of Christ to humanity was not about salvation *from* the world. It was about salvation *of* the world. Jesus showed a way of transformation from the injustices and violence that dominated the world of international relations and domestic affairs.

For Gandhi, the ends never justified the means. The same can be said of the work and ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr. Wrong must never be used to combat wrong. **Violence simply begets more violence.** Again, we see this in the escalation of verbal abuse as much or more so than physical violence. That's why the apostle Paul offers the admonishment in Romans 12:21 to **overcome evil not with more evil, but with good. That is our challenge. And it's a tough one.**

More specifically, Gandhi also wisely taught, **"Counter-hatred only increases the surface as well as the depth of hatred."** We need to take a closer look at the issue of counter-hatred. Jesus demonstrated this when he scolded one of his followers for cutting off the ear of one of the high priest's slaves when they came to arrest him. Jesus admonishes him, **"Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."** (Matt. 26:52). **We can apply that metaphorically in our own lives, to put our "swords" back into their place. Counter-hatred is indeed a big problem, even for good Christian folks. In fact, I believe that we must be careful that when we call out others for their hatred we don't become haters in return.** Maybe that's our deepest point of connection with the call to nonviolence. I have an example that I think highlights the issue of counter-hatred, which is a form of violence unto itself.

Beginning just over a week ago I was a part of what might be labeled a kerfuffle in the progressive community. More accurately, I'm the one who somewhat inadvertently started it. The issue boiled down to how to make an appropriate response to bias, prejudice and bigotry, something we all know is a problem here in Tulsa.

Here's just a bit of background. There is a loose knit group in Tulsa called the **"Say No To Hate" Coalition**. It was organized locally in 1988 to counter a KKK rally here in Tulsa. This isn't to be confused with the **"NO H8" Campaign** that formed nationally in response to California's passage of Proposition 8 that banned same-sex marriage in 2008. The mission of NO H8 is to promote LGBT equality, while the Say No To Hate Coalition seeks to confront *any* bias and bigotry, and especially racism. One of the lessons that MANY of us learned this past week is that these are not the same organization, like many of us believed. Nor do they have the same goals or tactics.

Now, getting back to the story. I don't have much of a problem calling a card-carrying member of the KKK a hater. But the Say No To Hate Coalition has called for rallies to counter other groups that, in my opinion, might be a bit harder to claim are based on actual hatred. Last week at City Hall there was a rally in support of the Confederate Battle Flag. In response, the Say No To Hate Coalition created a Facebook page calling for folks to gather at the same location following the flag rally for a "Sweep the Hate Away Rally." So this is what I posted on the Facebook page:

Perhaps this is not the proper forum for this comment, but I personally believe the entire issue involves a great deal of ignorance, as much or more so than actual hatred on the part of many. Categorizing, demonizing and labeling everyone not on the 'same page' of justice/injustice issues as a "hater" may not be the best approach toward those with whom we disagree. My concern is the use of the word "hate,"

rather than a necessary and appropriate response that is peaceful and non-confrontational...

My point, in the context of this sermon, is that **when we categorically label others as haters, we might be guilty of contributing to verbal violence.** I also stated in a later post on that same Facebook thread, "There are implications of the phrase "Say No To Hate" that are problematic. For **not everything done in opposition to our [progressive] view of social justice is done out of actual hatred.**" Now, I'm not implying that another's ignorant or bigoted words or actions aren't received as being hateful. Rather, I simply question whether anyone has the ability to know the heart, mind and intentions of another so fully as to automatically attribute their words and actions as coming from a place of actual hatred. Ignorance, fear, prejudice, even bigotry, yes. But hatred? In my opinion, that's a different theological matter that easily delves into the realm of violence if diagnosed improperly.

When I visited about all this with the President of Phillips Theological Seminary, Gary Peluso-Verdend, a few days ago, he affirmed that **the ultimate goal of the gospels doesn't stop with justice, but rather justice followed by reconciliation. I see little to no reconciliation with these rallies and counter-rallies.** There has to be a better way, a way that draws people into relationship through dialogue, understanding, and a lot of patience. That has been my approach with Presbyterian pastor colleagues with whom I have disagreed over issues of gender and sexual orientation equality. Building and nurturing relationships between ourselves and others with whom we disagree is vital to any real progress.

This real life example has helped me realize that **living into a life of nonviolence – particularly verbal and emotional nonviolence – is harder than it seems.** To think otherwise would be naïve. Perhaps you've had a similar encounter of some kind in our own experience. Such encounters can be used to remind us that **reconnecting with nonviolence in all its forms is an integral part of connecting with God.** Therefore, if nothing else, perhaps we might all think twice about how we react and respond to others.

As children of God, let us work hard to be nonviolent peacemakers.

Amen.

Resources:

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

Sermon Series: Connecting With God

Week 7: Reconnecting With Love

1 John 4:7-8, 16-21 1 Corinthians 13:1-8a, 13
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
August 16, 2015

The number 7 has a deep and spiritual meaning in the Bible. From the creation stories on the first pages of the Hebrew Bible, what Christians call the Old Testament, to the end of the New Testament, the number 7 was used to represent completeness, even perfection, both physically and spiritually. Perhaps you have noticed that this is the 7th sermon in the series, "Connecting With God." While not a complete consideration of this topic, and certainly not a perfect one, it is nonetheless the final sermon to complete this series on spiritual formation.

Over the weeks, starting on June 21, we have worked to expand our understanding of what it means to connect with God, to actually experience the Presence of God in our midst. For structure in this series of sermons, I have focused on a different chapter title each week from the book ***The Rebirthing of God: Christianity's Struggle for New Beginnings***, by **John Philip Newell**. I again encourage you to buy and read this remarkable book. Newell, as a reminder, is an ordained Church of Scotland minister, a scholar in the field of Celtic spirituality, and a former Warden of Iona Abbey in Scotland, where I spent a week in May during my sabbatical.

In this book, and throughout his work in the field of spirituality, Newell proposes that **we can move toward a connection with God not by searching for something from without ourselves, but rather by reaching deep within to connect with the Sacred Presence that dwells within all creation.** We accomplish that, he suggests, by reconnecting. We have talked about reconnecting with the earth, with compassion, with the Light, with the journey, with spiritual practice, with nonviolence, and today's topic, reconnecting with love.

How is the "rebirthing of God" within you and me, and within this community of faith, experienced through a reconnection with love, a term that is almost undefinable? After all, even the great Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist Carl Jung said of the mystery of love, "I have never been able to explain what it is." But Jung did say the apostle Paul came close when he wrote to the church in Corinth, love "bears all things," and "endures all things." In chapter 13 of 1 Corinthians, often called the "Love Chapter," Paul poetically states what has been used at countless marriage ceremonies, even though he was addressing the love that should be demonstrated among those in a community of faith, not specifically the love between two people in marriage.

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.*

*It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends. (vv. 4-8a)*

We are to understand, then, **when we connect with others with that kind of love, we are connecting with God.**

You often hear progressives say that *what* you believe isn't as important as *how* you put what you believe into action. That, of course, is a good corrective to strict orthodox dogma. However, when it comes to spirituality, what you believe about the nature and character of God is of paramount importance in how you experience God's presence. That's why so many of us are drawn to the New Testament book of 1 John. Let me repeat part of this passage.

*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God;
everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.
Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.
Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another...
If we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us.*

- 1 John 4:7-8, 11-12

God is love, and love is God. Therefore, there can be no rebirthing of God within us if we don't reconnect with love. While I know of no Christians who would disagree with that statement, **a large segment of Christianity has chosen, nonetheless, to focus on an understanding of the nature and character of God as judgmental, condemning, and even needy. This is a unfortunate consequence, for example, of taking the traditional doctrine of substitutionary atonement literally.**

An obsession with personal salvation, when tied to this particular ancient doctrine, **assumes that there is a price needed to be paid for God's forgiveness.** That price was the death of Jesus. The doctrine states that although a payment needed to be made to make us right with God we are not worthy to make payment ourselves. Therefore, a substitute sacrifice was needed. God, in the form of a perfect Jesus, died on our behalf to appease an offended God.

Does anyone else have a problem with a God that can't or won't forgive until blood is shed? Some suggest that's simply a leftover from ancient mythology. And doesn't that seem to run counter to our understanding and deepest experiences of love? Newell writes:

Who are the people who have most loved us in our lives amid our failures and betrayals? Could we imagine them ever requiring payment to forgive us? **True love is free.** Perhaps so much wrong has been done by this doctrine that the cross [itself] has become an irredeemable symbol for many.

If that is the case, then we need to work to redeem an understanding of the cross. Essentially, **the cross** "is a symbol of the mystery at the heart of Christianity's great gift to the world – **the belief that love can reconcile all things.**"

Drawing on her Jewish heritage, 20th century French philosopher, mystic, and political activist Simone Weil (1909-1943) wrote, "The universe is an expression of love and **everything in the universe is essentially a means to love.**" Think of the implications. Newell poetically writes:

The rising sun is a means to love, as is the whiteness of the moon at night. Every life-form, the shape of the weeping willow by the distant pond, the song of the robin in the hedgerow, the light in the eyes of every creature – all these are the means to love. I am a means to love, as are you, your children, and your nation. Do we know that? Do we know that this is our sacred role in the world?

When we become aware that what is deepest in the heart of the other is a resonance, or living vibration, of the Sacred – whether that be in a tree or another plant, a wild creature, or another human being – we find ourselves wanting to say yes [and to be in relationship]. We find that our heart is drawn to the heart of the other.

So where is the Sacred to be found? In the body of the earth, in our human bodies, and in the body of our communities and nations. This is what it means to understand that **all of creation is not only made by God but also of God.**

I believe the words in 1 John 4:19-21. **“We love because God first loved us.” That doesn’t sound like a God who needs a sacrifice in order to make things right.** It continues, “Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.”

Going back to my sermon a few weeks ago when I reflected on the “Say No To Hate” Coalition of Tulsa, we are given a very strong directive not to fall into the trap of automatically categorizing and demonizing those with different views from ourselves as ‘haters.’ As I mentioned, sometimes it’s a fine line between being hated and becoming a hater in return. This, we are commanded, must not be part of our lives as followers of Jesus.

Celtic spirituality sees the nature and character of God as a Sacred Presence that dwells within all of creation, more than as an Almighty Being out there somewhere. This leads to a more tolerant and accepting understanding that God is not confined to one particular religious tradition, practice, or sacrament. Christianity, for the most part throughout its history, has not been able to humble itself enough to realize that reality.

Martin Buber (1868-1965), the great Jewish philosopher and theologian, said, **“I do not believe in Jesus but I do believe with him.”** Newell concludes, “What if Christianity had gotten that one right? What if we had realized long ago that **the important thing is not getting the world to believe what we believe, getting others to subscribe to particular beliefs about Jesus? The important thing is inviting the world to believe with Jesus, to believe in the way of love.**”

Progressive Christianity, in my opinion, is starting to get that right. This radical approach to a life of faith suggests that **calling oneself a Christian is not ultimately what matters. “What matters is whether you and I believe in love. What matters is whether, with Jesus, we are following the way of love, for this is all we need.”** To quote theologians John, Paul, George, and Ringo, “All You Need Is Love.”

Take Newell's words to heart, **“We are made as a means to love. It is God-given. The question is whether we will live what we truly are – love.”**

Let me conclude this entire sermon series with a couple of sentences that I think best summarizes the Celtic way of life and faith.

What is deepest in us, and in all created things, is not opposed to God, rather it is of God. Therefore, all of creation is interrelated and can act as a means to reveal and experience the Presence of God.

Taking this to heart is how God is “reborn” in us:

- reconnecting with the sacredness of the earth
- reclaiming the way of compassion
- seeing the Light in all things
- recommitting to the journey, including with other faiths
- rediscovery of spiritual practice
- rededication to nonviolence
- and above all else, a reuniting of ourselves to love.

Hopefully, this series of sermons has broadening your own understanding of what it means to connect with God, and of spiritual formation. And perhaps it has even been affirming in that you have been connecting with God all along, more than you ever realized.

Amen.

Resources:

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

The Celtic Way: The Interrelatedness of the Spiritual and the Material

John 1:14-18 Psalm 8
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
August 9, 2015

There is a verse from a song with these lyrics:

*Don't throw the past away
You might need it some rainy day
Dreams can come true again
When everything old is new again*

Everything Old is New Again, written by Peter Allen and Carole Bayer Sager in 1974. The title comes from that even older popular saying that continues to prove itself time and time again. History does seem to repeat itself. But it may seem to be an odd thing for progressive Christianity to embrace, given its efforts to rescue Christianity from the engrained dogma of the past. We *don't* really want everything old to be new again.

Strangely, however, if you go back far enough, especially before Christian doctrines and practices became thoroughly institutionalized and worse, imperialized, you will find a wealth of theology and spirituality that progressives can indeed embrace. That's been the experience of many (including several here at College Hill who are part of our Celtic Spirituality Small Group) when looking at the particular ancient Celtic influences on Christianity. It must be stated, however, that most historians now believe there was no unified and identifiable entity entirely separate from the mainstream of Western Roman Catholicism. In other words, **there was not a Celtic Church opposed to the Roman Catholic Church. Rather, simply being so far away from the power center of Rome and the direct influence of the popes, the isolated Christianity in the British Isles (especially in Ireland – once known as the edge of the known world) took on forms that incorporated some of the customs, practices, and even beliefs of the local inhabitants**, who were led by spiritual leaders called Druids.

The form of Christianity that started developing around the 4th-9th centuries in Ireland (which it is important to note was never part of the Roman Empire) was thought to be less authoritarian than its Roman-influenced counterpart. It was believed to be more connected and in tune with nature and the earth, more comfortable dealing with the pre-Christian traditions of its inhabitants, and friendlier to women, who in turn had more say in church governance.

With that bit of background, **what is it about the Celtic tradition, especially its approach to spirituality, to connecting with God, that is resonating in such profound ways with so many of us progressives?** Let's start with an understanding of our basic humanity. Are human beings inherently bad, or are we inherently good? When the

Roman church solidified its power and authority, it leaned heavily on the teachings of 4th century theologian St. Augustine.

One of the hallmarks of Augustine's theology was the concept of original sin. This doctrine is still highly influential in modern Christianity, as it was in the theology of John Calvin during the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago in central Europe, to which we Presbyterians trace our roots. Celtic historian and former dean of the Iona Abbey in Scotland, John Philip Newell, writes in his 1997 book, *Listening For the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*:

Augustine's thinking and the developing spirituality of the Church in the Roman world accentuated the evil in humanity and our essential unrighteousness. He stated that the human child is born depraved and humanity's sinful nature has been sexually transmitted from one generation to the next, stretching from Adam to the present.

Augustine believed that from conception and birth we lack the image of God until it is restored in the sacrament of baptism..." [conveniently a function of the Church]. This understanding developed a spirituality that accentuated a division between the Church, which was seen as holy, on the one hand and the life of the world, perceived as godless, on the other.

Rejecting the doctrine of original sin, however, is not a modern phenomenon. In fact, other theologians criticized it immediately – but were later then silenced. None was as influential as a **British-born 4th century theologian named Pelagius.** He maintained, as Newell writes, "the image of God can be seen in every newborn child and that, although obscured by sin, it exits at the heart of every person, waiting to be released through the grace of God."

The Celtic Church firmly believed that God is at the heart of all life and within all people. This later developed into a spiritual understanding that **we can look to God's good creation just as we look to the Scriptures to hear and receive the living Word of God.** It was said that God can be revealed in two books. The book called the Bible, and the book of creation. As you've heard it described before in the term "**thin place,**" the Celtic understanding was that there was **very little to no distance between the spiritual and the material.** When once asked, "Where is heaven?" and elderly Irish woman, back in the 1800s, responded, "About a foot and a half above our heads." It's that close.

Celtic spirituality, therefore, can be characterized by seeking the Sacred Presence of the Divine within all things. The ancient Church based in Rome, however, felt threatened by this affront to their power and authority, and hence sought to squelch the Celtic influence. They did a very effective job doing just that, as did the later Protestant reformers. In fact, after moving to Rome and defending his position, Pelagius was put on trial as a heretic, was found guilty, and later excommunicated.

Think now, for a moment, of the implications of the Celtic understanding of the relationship between God and humanity. **Deeper than any wrong is us, deeper than our sinfulness, is the light of God – that divine spark of God's image that has been present in all things since the very beginning of creation itself.**

Theological concepts such as **redemption**, for example, “can be understood in terms of **a setting free, a releasing of what we essentially are**. Our goodness is sometimes so deeply buried as to be lost or erased, but it is there, having been planted by God, and awaits its release. For Pelagius, the redemption that Christ brings is such a liberation, a freeing of the good that is in us, indeed at the very heart of life.”

Releasing what is fundamentally within each and every one of us is a monumentally different approach than what the Church as traditionally taught, that our human nature has to be replaced from without. Newell explains it this way:

In the early stream of Celtic spirituality, **God’s gift of grace is regarded not as planting something totally new in essentially bad soil, but as bringing out or releasing the goodness which is present in the soil of human life but obstructed by evil.**

“Grace is seen as enabling our nature to flourish, as co-operating with the light that is within every person. Thus many of the [Celtic] prayers for grace ask for the development of aspects of our essential, God-given nature. Those **prayers for grace ask for the restoration of what is at the core of our being.**

Newell goes on to state in his 1999 book, *The Book of Creation: An Introduction to Celtic Spirituality*, “The extent to which we fail to reflect the image of God in our lives is the extent to which we have become less than truly human. I encourage you, therefore, to **look for the image of God deep within yourself, within your neighbor, and yes, that means within those with whom you seem to have nothing in common – theologically, politically, racially, culturally, whatever.**

This historically Celtic approach to spirituality should also inform our own practice of ministry and mission – a ministry that seeks to liberate and free the goodness of God that is *already* at the very heart of all life. **Our role as the church, therefore, becomes one of working to help liberate rather than acting as the custodian of salvation, which in my opinion, is steeped in spiritual arrogance and issues of power and control.** And let us not forget that the opportunity to sense the Sacred Presence extends to all of God’s creation. That’s why there is such a strong bond with nature within the Celtic tradition. Not surprisingly, that strong bond is a basic characteristic of most indigenous people’s spirituality, like Native American spirituality.

If I were to summarize the Celtic way of life and faith in a nutshell it would be this, paraphrasing the words of John Philip Newell in his 2008 book, *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation*:

What is deepest in us, and in all created things, is not opposed to God, rather it is of God.

Understanding that a Sacred Presence is intricately and mysteriously interwoven into all life and matter will transform your approach to life: to relationships, to ministry efforts, to stewardship, and to connecting with a very real sense of God’s presence. I encourage you to look for God’s presence and grace among and within you as you go about every activity in your life, including the seemingly mundane tasks of ordinary everyday life. Look for God’s presence in the interconnectedness, the sacredness, and

the beauty of all of creation. Look for it within the different seasons of year. Look for it within the different seasons of your life.

Reject any doctrine that seeks to separate the spiritual from the material.

Remember, or learn for the first time, that **creation does not come out of nothing. It comes out of God! God's grace, therefore, as we understand it as expressed through Christ, is given to reconnect us to our nature, not to save us from our nature.**

You carry that Sacred Presence deep within the core of your being. We all do. That is the Celtic way.

Amen.

Resources:

John Philip Newell:

Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation, 2008.

Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality, 1997.

The Book of Creation: An Introduction to Celtic Spirituality, 1999.



Approaching Iona Abbey, Scotland, by ferry

Photo by Rev. Todd Freeman, 5-16-15



Clonmacnoise Monastery, Ireland • Photo by Rev. Todd Freeman, 5-6-15

