

2020.05.10

SERMON

5th Sunday of Easter

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In my Father's house are many mansions... I bet the King James version of our Gospel is pretty familiar to most of us. Not in my father's house there are many rooms, but in my father's house there are many mansions. It's the kind of image that makes us go "Wait! What?!" It's an expansive, beyond ordinary metaphor. It fits with a God who is this close and that unimaginable. It requires us to reach beyond our every day, beyond our own limitations, beyond our puny humanity to something so big and so whole we can get dizzy trying to comprehend it. In my father's house there are many mansions puts us on notice that holiness is bigger and more complicated and more paradoxical than we could ask or imagine or desire... Jesus is telling us we need to shift up our sensors for when God is in the house. Because we don't want to miss it!

It reminds me of two things. One is a poem by David Whyte. The other is an encounter my father had with a wise Quaker.

The poem by David Whyte is called *The Opening of Eyes* and it goes like this:

That day I saw beneath dark clouds,
the passing light over the water
and I heard the voice of the world speak out,
I knew then, as I had before,
life is no passing memory of what has been
nor the remaining pages in a great book
waiting to be read.

It is the opening of eyes long closed.
It is the vision of far off things
seen for the silence they hold.
It is the heart after years
of secret conversing,
speaking out loud in the clear air.

It is Moses in the desert
fallen to his knees before the lit bush.
It is the man throwing away his shoes
as if to enter heaven
and finding himself astonished,
opened at last,
fallen in love with solid ground.

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I think that is what Jesus is trying to show his disciples, trying to show us! in his metaphor of the house which contains many mansions. Christ wants us to SEE the possibility of falling in love with God. Falling in love with wholeness. Falling in love with where we are.

People often get all focused how this shows us there's room for everyone in God's house. Or how God's house is a temple or a church and we, the people are it. Or how God's house is in the here and now, not when we get to heaven... But I want to shout WAIT... before we get to all these beautiful interpretations can we just stop for a minute and notice that what at first seemed to simply be a house turns out to have many mansions inside it? Can we just take a breath and allow ourselves to be startled, confused, astonished... by the very thought of this being so? Just how big is God's house? Just how big is this wholeness being offered to us? Are you ready for the generosity of this gift, this falling in love with solid ground, losing your heart to what is here and present and available all around you? This welcome home offered to us by our God? This invitation into a realm so big every single one of us, past, present, and yet to come will fit and feel at welcomed home? A home which offers us sanctuary, blessing, nurture.... An invitation to come in where we can be our best and brightest selves, where we can be whole without waiting until after we die, where we can know how beloved we are. And then act from that knowledge of being deeply treasured.

So the story: When I was 17 the possibility of going to a small Quaker boarding school on the north end of the Kootenay Lake opened up in my life. For me it was like being offered heaven. But when I told my parents I wanted to go there my father said no. In Rossland people did not know about Quakers except for the Quaker Oats box. But somehow my father knew that during the Vietnam war the Quakers had offered medical aid to both South Vietnam and – horror of horrors – to North Vietnam. To the Enemy. And no daughter of his was going to a school run by people like that! But it turned out I had managed to put my name on the waiting list – who knew I had such power. I certainly didn't! At the end of the summer my name rose to the top and there was a phone call from John Stevenson at the school to my home. Was I still interested? My mother said Mr Stevenson better speak to my father. A pharmacist. Working in his dispensary with no time for chatting on the phone. Who talked with John Stevenson for half an hour. My father said “He seems like a very fine man. Do you really want to go there?” My father's sensors had twigged to the wholeness in John. The wholeness which allowed my father and John, two strangers from two very different experiences to be in one of the mansions in God's house as they spoke to each other. Two very different and very ordinary people. Like you and me. All we have to do is die to our old selves, our old ways of seeing the world, so we can be born anew. With newborn eyes. Understanding anew. Be born into this incredible beauty and wholeness.

We are living in a time of deaths and rebirths – they're happening all around us, right! And as Frederic Buechner says, “Thus the gospel is not only good and new but, if you take it seriously, a holy terror. Because Jesus never claimed that the process of being changed from a slob into a human being was going to be a Sunday school picnic. On the contrary. Childbirth may occasionally be painless, but rebirth, never.”

And so much conspires against our rebirth – our attachments to our habits and comforts, the economic structures of our society, the ways we see the world. Usually. Only right now – it's all different. We have been stopped in our tracks. And we see signs of hope, signs we are seeing the world in a new way. There's a big crack, as Leonard Cohen would say, and the light's getting in. The writer, Kim Stanley Robinson believes “the virus is rewriting our imaginations. What felt impossible has become thinkable.” Hmm

- sounds like just the kind of time for God to be at work. Let's help! Let us freely relinquish the old and all join together in passionate pursuit of wholeness for the entire planet, for every eco-system and body of land or water. It seems like now is the time. Here we are.

Annie Dillard writes in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

"I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck."

We too are being lifted and struck these days. How would we be a bell rung... Let's be a bell that rings with clarity, with kindness and justice and mercy for every single created entity. Let us be people of The Way. The way and the truth and the life. Amen