

The Pieces and the Whole—Message for 1 February 2015

Greeting: We are still warm in celebration—of Ruth and of our community—still dancing in the Spirit. John Donne, the rector of St. Paul’s in London from 1621 to 1631 wrote in Meditation 17 when he was very ill in 1623: “Perchance he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill as that he knows not it tolls for him. And perchance I may think myself so much better than I am, as that they who are about me, and see my state, may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that. The church is catholic, universal, so are all her actions; all that she does, belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that head which is my head too, and ingrafted into that body whereof I am a member. And when she buries a person, that action concerns me; all humankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one person dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God’s hand is in every translation, and that hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again, for that library where every book shall lie open to one another; as therefore the bell that rings to a sermon, calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come; so this bell calls us all.”

Hymn 1 from the blue book number 20, “No One is an Island”

From John Donne’s sermon preached on Candlemas Day, which is a festival celebrated on February 2nd: “Says St. Bernard: God hears the very first motions of a person’s heart, which, that person, till proceeding to a farther consideration, doth not hear, not feel, not deprehend. That soul that is accustomed to

direct herself to God, upon every occasion, that, as a flower at sun-rising, conceives a sense of God in very beam of God's, and spreads and dilates itself towards God, in a thankfulness, in every small blessing that is shed upon her; that soul, that as a flower at the sun's declining, contracts and gathers in, and shuts herself up as though she had received a blow, whensoever she hears her Saviour wounded by an oath, or blasphemy, or execration; that soul, who, whatsoever string be struck in her, bass or treble, her high or her low estate, is ever tuned toward God, that soul prays sometimes when it does not know that it prays. I hear that man name God and ask him "what said you" and perchance he cannot tell; but I remember that he casts forth some of those darts of a devout soul, which, though they have not particular deliberations, and be not formal prayers, yet they are the pregnant evidences and blessed fruits of a religious custom; much more is it true, which St. Bernard says of them, God hears that voice of the heart, which the heart itself hears not, that is, at first considers not."

From more of Meditation 17 I quoted in our call to worship: "No one is an island, entire of itself; every person is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were; any person's death diminishes me, because I am involved in humankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

Psalm 121: I lift up my eyes to the hills—

Where does my help come from?

My help comes from the Lord, The Maker of heaven and earth. The Lord will not let your foot slip—the One who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, the Light who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

The Lord watches over you—the Lord is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all harm—God will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore.

Our second hymn is number 293 in the green hymnal, “When I Needed a Neighbor”

Joys and Concerns---then music interlude

Dear Friends—Yes, it is winter, and so now we are the flowers turning to the sun, drinking up the light, even when we do not know consciously we are doing so. We pray that in every encounter, we might complete a bit more of each other, each flower making the garden, each beam a glisten towards the great eternal brightness. Let us give and accept comfort from each other, knowing the Light within is also surrounding us all.
Amen

Hymn 3 is “I Am an Acorn” 242 in the green.

Children may now head downstairs for time with each other, to nurture each other with lessons and play in community.

Message:

Dear Friends—Last week here in meeting for worship, many of the messages the Spirit spoke through a number of us were both about seeking the Truth, meaning, the Light, and about how various people’s lives were speaking or spoke to us. Seeking and listening—being open and taking in, those feelings of something missing, but also of connection. Those messages led to me to John Donne, a metaphysical poet and preacher in

England who wrote so near to the beginning of Quakerism, and was so noted for his beautiful metaphors of the flower, the book, the island, the bell, the Light. And as I lifted my eyes to the hills, as the psalmist wrote, I saw, as Donne did, that the Lord was close, and in, and all around us.

As we seek, are we ready to be found? As we answer that of God in others, are we letting our lives speak? As we hold others in the Light, are we ready and willing to be held? Do we know that we are held? We are.

And as the experiment with the intercessory nuns we heard about last week seemed to show a power of prayer for healing beyond the knowledge of those for whom were prayed, there is also Donne's observation that we might be praying, and not know that it is prayer. God's presence, that inner Light, the piece that we might each have or encounter, is part of a Whole, and as we seek to know more of that incredible whole of Truth, it may be that we only gain more in a community of sharing the pieces, the limited experience of God that comes to each of us.

So, as flowers that stay true to the Light, we come to make up the garden by being together and appreciating our varied beauty. As pages of the universal story, we only make full sense when we are bound together in that living holy book. We are not islands, alone, but together the continents, the world.

I read an interesting essay this week about how consciousness, our minds, in this age of the increasingly virtual world, may be becoming even more separated from reality, from the real world, and from each other. Many meditational practices seek to help us transcend the conscious mind by centering on our bodies, our breathing, for it is only in actualizing this bodily awareness can we abandon the delusions that, in essence, it is

all our minds alone—that we have to reason it all out ourselves or even understand it fully. No, we can know it experientially.

The essay itself was about touch, and how we live in a world where there may be less and less touch of person to person. The power of our touch is now used on machines—what is technically called “capacitive sensing” where our phones and computers can detect that it is a human that is touching it, a living thing. So scientists know all about that power and make the screen respond or the door open. How much more power is there when we touch each other, both physically and emotionally and in the Spirit? It is our practice to close our meetings with touch, with that reassurance that we are all really here with each other and with the unspoken truth of presence, of listening, of seeking and being found, of holding in the light and being held, of letting our lives speak and of listening— and of answering.

It is not all intentional—in fact much of it is intuitive. Being present does not need a singular purpose or result—the hymn is not prescribing a solution, it is simply asking “were you there” and pledging “I’ll be there”. That handshake of community at the end of meeting, of greeting for the next part of our lives, a closing and an opening is one way of saying “we’re here”.

Another way we touch is in the dancing together—as we did last night, both actually and vicariously, as we do Spiritually here in meeting and at many times. As T.S. Eliot wrote, At the **still point** of the **turning world**. Neither flesh nor fleshless; Neither from nor towards; at the **still point**, there the dance is, But neither arrest nor movement.

So, let us keep dancing, finding our spiritual partners, following our steps, moving in community, ever learning and being open, hearing the music, saying yes when we are asked to dance.

We will be singing a final hymn that was written by a good friend of mine and Craig's, Bruce Bielawa, who was inspired by Donne—"that soul prays sometimes when it does not know that it prays". It comes from a sermon for Candlemas, for February 2nd, as I mentioned. That ecclesiastical festival is in honor of the presentation of the infant Jesus at the Temple and the purification of Mary. Candles are blessed on this day, as the symbols of Christmas are put away for the year. Candles, those small but warm sources of light. Let them shine and be blessings. The Groundhog may be scared of the shadow cast by light on February 2nd, but we're not!

And when that bell rings, it is not death, but life--it is that translation of what we heard and read and saw and prayed. Lift your eyes to hills! The Lord, through all of us, watches over you. We are all pieces of the whole—together we make sense.

Closing Hymn: On the sheet of paper "That Soul Prays" written by a good friend of Craig's and mine, Bruce Beilawa.

Closing: The Lord watches over you—the Lord is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night. The Lord will keep you from all harm—God will watch over your life; the Lord will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore. Be held, be comforted, be found—bloom—shine.

Thanks/Introductions/Announcements/Afterthoughts

Postlude