

Order of Service – June 7, 2015

Message: Accepting the Cup

*Musical Prelude - Precious Lord, Take My Hand
Greeting*

1st Hymn: I Need Thee Every Hour, Green 190

Readings: Matthew 26:39, Stephen Jenkinson excerpt, Psalm 23, Luke 32:46

2nd Hymn: The Lone, Wild Bird, Green 240

*Joys and Concerns
Musical interlude - Nearer My God to Thee*

Prayer

3rd Hymn: All Through The Night, Green 213
(a children's lullaby and then the little ones leave)

*Pastoral reflection or message
Silent worship*

4th Hymn: Amazing Grace, Green 185

*Closing
Introductions/Announcements/Afterthoughts
Postlude*

Greeting:

Good Morning, Friends. This week has been a hard week for this meeting. My heart has been full with a sense of the preciousness of life.

Joanna Macy, ecological philosopher and Buddhist activist, wrote these words as she contemplated the loss of her husband of 56 years:

In the face of impermanence and death, it takes courage to love the things of this world and to believe that praising them is our noblest calling. This is not a stoic courage, not keeping a stiff upper lip when shattered by loss. It is courage born of the ever-unexpected discovery that acceptance of impermanence yields an expansion of our being. In loving what disappears, naming the way it keeps streaming through our hands, we can hear the song that streaming makes.

We gather together today as a community to hear that streaming song, and to raise our own voices in harmony with it, in praise of the beloved, uncertain, impermanent things of this world. We gather in perhaps mournful, perhaps reluctant acceptance of the difficult cup extended to us in this uncertainty and impermanence, and the unexpected blessing it may give us: that expansion of our being that we might experience as a reaching inward and outward for God, and a reaching outward toward one another in love.

First Hymn: I Need Thee Every Hour, Green 190

Readings

Matthew 26:39

And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me...”

excerpt: STARS. by Stephen Jenkinson, from *Die Wise, A Manifesto for Sanity and Soul.*

It’s dark. You are standing in a field, far from the house. This is the midnight sky of your younger, wilder days. It is ablaze, aching with stars. It is the vault of heaven, indigo sea of time pierced by light from the other side. The horizons are gone and the Bridge of Sighs, the one they say the dead walk to leave this world, dazzles you. Dew settles on your shoulders and you’re atremble, no longer full with comprehension and certainties. Every idea you have seems too small for the world. The blessings tumble. You lived long enough to see a night such as this, and you’re stilled by it. There are unlikely companions in the field with you, everyone quiet. Someone looks up into the night sky and says, “you see that star right there? Could be it isn’t there anymore.” All conviction is sent reeling. Nothing is truer than this. The mysteries roll...

... starlight traveling a bewildering distance for so long that there is every chance that it doesn’t even exist anymore, and all of that having already happened, and you standing there, your face blazed in the dark by a starlight gone, seeing it all, what is and what isn’t there enthroned by your witness: That is a marvel, and surely that is how awe is born in us. ...So I am counting on this possibility: That out of the encounter with confounding starlight could come marvel and gratitude for being here, alive, for now...(And) The times of dying, of real and proper sorrow, could be woven by a gratitude... for being overwhelmed by something that happens every day, by ordinary awe. And each of us could be gathered in by that raveling covenant of sorrow and thanksgiving...Drink enough of the sweet, strong mead of grief and love for being alive and it isn’t long before you’re sending a trembling, life-soaked greeting out to everything that came before you and to everything that will follow, a kind of love letter to the Big Story...maybe this swirl of awe and marvel and good intent for the world and gratitude for ourselves in it is

where all the religions come from. That is where our feel for the sacred in the world is conjured, surely, the ordinary, staggering mystery...

Psalm 23:5 My cup runneth over...

Luke 32:46 Last words of Jesus: "Father, Into Thy Hands I Commend My Spirit."

Second Hymn: The Lone, Wild Bird, Green 240

Joys and Concerns

Musical Interlude

Prayer

Holy One. Maker of All Mystery. Before your mysteries and your Creation we bow, we kneel in love, in trembling and awe. We hold the cup you have given us. Sometimes it feels like a begging bowl, sometimes a cup of blessings, filled to overflowing, sometimes a bitter drink of loss and not knowing, sometimes an offering. We are at your mercy. Our need for you is great. Be with us here, Holy Spirit, Beloved God. In our thirst, in our hunger, in our loss, in the staggering beauty and bounty of your world, and the preciousness of our lives, we stand in awe and need. Be with us here, move among us, stir within us, that we might feel your presence, that we might drink of your cup, that we might be fervent in our cherishing of one another, our days, this earth, this life. Amen.

Third Hymn: All Through the Night, Green 213

Message: "Accepting the Cup"

Fourth Hymn: Amazing Grace, Green 185

Benediction

Onto a Vast Plain (Adaptation of Rilke poem)

Now you must go out. Now you must go out into your heart as onto a vast plain.

Now the immense shared loneliness begins. Meet one another's gaze, hear the streaming song. Take this cup and pass it among you. Love what passes through your hands.

The sky remains above you.

It is what you have.

Be of the earth now, be evensong.

Be the ground lying under the sky.

Be...like a thing ripened until it is real, seasoned and true, and holy, until you reach out for The One who began it all and feel Those hands reach back for you.

Message: Accepting the Cup

When my sister Anna and I were teenagers, more than twenty years ago, we had an ongoing conversation, we made up a story, and added to it year after year. part cosmological conjecture, part theology, part science fiction, part peer counseling, we hypothesized an alternative design plan for the Universe in which we eliminated a key element of uncertainty from the human situation. In our fictional design plan, everyone would be born with a prominent birthmark across our foreheads, bearing very clearly the exact date, time, and location of our deaths. In our stories, we tried to extrapolate the implications of clearing up that particular part of the mystery of our living and dying. We thought that it would change fundamentally our experience of being alive, our human conjectures and philosophies about what it all means. We would tell stories about this world and its people. What did the theologies entail. Did God seem more friendly or less so? In a fictional universe where some authoritative force we might call God is regularly communicating to us crucial information in very clear signs, would the world seem more hospitable or more sinister? would it be more stressful, more dreadful, or would there be more peace in our hearts if we are all given a few more pieces of the puzzle?

It was all fiction, of course, but what Anna and I concluded is that eliminating some of the uncertainty in our human condition would change something essentially true, something essentially built into our experience of being alive now, here, in this Universe. Changing one piece of the mystery we are given theoretically changes everything. at least hypothetically, it makes for a whole different universe, a whole different way that things are.

In this universe, uncertainty and impermanence appear to be basic and intrinsic to the way that things are set up. They are essential conditions that fundamentally shape our understanding of ourselves, our experience of our lives, the faiths we build, and our relationship to those we love. They are what we are given to work with. This week, I have been thinking that impermanence and uncertainty -- the inevitability of our own deaths and the deaths of those we love, and yet the unknown particulars -- this is the cup that we might wish to have pass from our lips. This is a cup of suffering, and grief. We might, like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, plead with the God who pours and offers such a glass, let this cup pass from our lips, please Father. But, like Jesus, we also know that it is God's to give, and ours to drink, that it cannot be refused.

Impermanence and uncertainty are gifts of awful opportunity -- awful gifts, that carry with them an opportunity for awe. They are terrible blessings. They are like holy and confounding rhetorical questions. Crafting a faith can be a response to these questions, as can be learning to love. Love is a very brave answer to these questions that are the mysterious cornerstones of this universe.

Recently Cyrus and Caz and I went to an outdoor skills field day. We could participate in all sorts of skill building: making a shelter from reeds, building a bow, identifying wild edibles. We were invited to make “treasure boxes or bowls” like this one. we used coals, embers, to burn out, carve out a space in a piece of wood, to make a bowl. And I thought: That is how it is with uncertainty and impermanence. they are like burning, smoldering embers, that carve out a place in ourselves, in which we hold our silence, our longing, our sorrow, our prayers, our love -- all the treasures that sustain us. Like wood to an ember, our Love and faith consent to -- bow to, yield to -- the burning coals of impermanence and uncertainty. They smolder and hollow a great space inside us where awe and grief and the willingness not to understand come to be held.

It is hard. I hope I do not sound as if I think it is easy. There are nights when the knowing that my children and my beloved husband will die wakes me and I cannot get back to sleep. I go to my sons’ room and they are there, alive, sleeping, beautiful, breathing quietly. And I know that the cup I hold is immeasurably bitter and overflowing with immeasurable sweetness. Both, at the same time.

But I think that Faith and love can grow in that hollowed out space.

Faith is sparked where there is not knowing. And Love has the power to flourish where things die. There isn’t any other place for love to flower, but where things die. In this universe, impermanent is what we are, and impermanent beings are what we are given to love, and what we give all of our love to. Rilke asserts in one of his letters that the transient nature of all things is critical to our capacity to cherish and to praise. It is because we and our beloved people are not here forever that we are impelled to see to them, to see creation, and to experience aliveness as exquisitely, inestimably precious. Love is fierce when we can't hold on forever. Ithaca homeopath and elder caregiver Carrie Stearns wrote, on the passing of her beloved partner, that “Living life through the lens of its end reveals a truer sense of preciousness than anything else I have experienced.”

In the end it is love, and its other side, grief, that can crack us open, fill us with awe, cause us to be permeated with gratitude, cause us to send that tear-soaked, life-soaked love letter to the Big Story we are part of. And yes, yes, each of us are

gathered in by what Stephen Jenkinson calls that “raveling covenant of sorrow and thanksgiving.” That is something to put your faith in. That is belonging. That is love.

Joanna Macy, whose reflection on Rilke began our meeting for worship, has also written “The heart that breaks open can contain the whole universe.” It is into that Universe, as big as our broken hearts and bigger yet, big enough to hold all the stars, all the givers of light that have ever been -- into the Hands of that Holy Mystery we commend our Spirits when the time comes. Like Jesus, We commend our Spirits, and the Spirits of everyone we love. Our cup runneth over.