

Melinda Grube, January 17, 2016

Musical Prelude

Greeting: I greet you in the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. ...*Peace as the world commonly understands it comes when the summer sky is clear and the sun shines in scintillating beauty, when the pocketbook is full, when the mind and body are free of ache and pain, and when the shores of Spain have been reached. But this is not true peace. The peace of which Paul spoke is a calmness of soul amid terrors of trouble, inner tranquility amid the howl and rage of outer storm, the serene quiet at the center of the hurricane amid the howling and jostling winds. We readily understand the meaning of peace when everything is going right and when one is "up and in," but we are baffled when Paul speaks of that true peace which comes when a man is "down and out," when burdens lie heavy upon his shoulders, when pain throbs annoyingly in his body, when he is confined by the stone walls of a prison cell, and when disappointment is inescapably real. True peace, a calm that exceeds all description and explanation, is peace amid storm and tranquility amid disaster.*

Through faith we may inherit Jesus' legacy, "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you." Paul at Philippi, incarcerated in a dark and desolate dungeon, his body beaten and bloody, his feet chained, and his spirit tired, joyously sang the songs of Zion at midnight. The early Christians, facing hungry lions in the arena and the excruciating pain of the chopping block, rejoiced that they had been deemed worthy to suffer for the sake of Christ. Negro slaves, bone-weary in the sizzling heat and the marks of whip lashes freshly etched on their backs, sang triumphantly, "By and by I'm gwin to lay down this heavy load." These are living examples of peace that passeth all understanding. (from "Shattered Dreams", 1963)

First Hymn: Green p. 135 "Breathe on Me, Breath of God"

First Reading: Jeremiah 8:20- 9:1

The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved.” For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored? O, that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!

Second Reading: John 14: 15-19

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.

Third Reading: Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, 1413

The place which Jesus takes in our soul he will never more vacate, for in us is his home of homes, and it is the greatest delight for him to dwell there. This was a delectable and restful sight, so it is so in truth forevermore; and to contemplate this while we are here is most pleasing to God, and very great profit to us. And the soul who thus contemplates is made like him who is contemplated, and united to him in rest and peace. And it was a singular joy and bliss to me that I saw him sit, for the contemplation of that sitting revealed to me the certainty that he will dwell in us forever; and I knew truly that it was he who had revealed everything to me before. And when I had contemplated this with great attention, our Lord very humbly revealed words to me, without voice and without opening of lips, as he had done before, and said very seriously: Know it well, it was no raving, which you saw today, but accept and believe it and hold firmly to it, and you will not be overcome....

And these words, “You will not be overcome,” were said very insistently and strongly, for certainty and strength against every tribulation which may come. He did not say: You will not be assailed, you will not be belabored, you will not be disquieted, but he said: “You will not be overcome.”

Second Hymn: Henry Francis Lyte wrote this hymn while he was dying of tuberculosis. He passed away three weeks later. p. Red 284 “Abide With Me”

Joys and Concerns

Musical Interlude

Prayer: Howard Thurman, who would deliver the eulogy for Dr. King in 1968, was himself one of America’s most acclaimed and respected preachers. After taking a special semester of study with Rufus Jones, he developed a lifelong relationship with Friends often reflected in his ministry. This is one of his prayers:

“We wait in the quietness for some centering moment that will redefine, reshape, and refocus our lives. It does seem to be a luxury to be able to give thought and time to the ups and downs of one’s private journey while the world around is so sick and weary and desperate. But, our Father, we cannot get through the great anxieties that surround us until, somehow, a path is found through the little anxieties that beset us. Dost Thou understand what it is like to be caught between the agony of one’s own private needs and to be tempest-tossed by needs that overwhelm and stagger the mind and paralyze the heart? Dost Thou understand this, our Father?”

For the long loneliness, the deep and searching joy and satisfaction, the boundless vision—all these things that give to Thee so strong a place in a world so weak—we thank Thee, Father. For whatever little grace Thou wilt give to Thy children even as they wait in confidence and stillness in Thy presence, we praise Thee. O love of God, love of God, where would we be without Thee, where?”

Third Hymn: Red p. 235 “There is a Balm in Gilead” (Following this children’s hymn, young Friends who so wish, depart.)

Message: “Now Look Here”

These years have been difficult and unsettling years. It sometimes seems to me that the work of generations for a more peaceful and just world have been disregarded, swept aside, counted as nothing. Often when people speak to me of the future, they do so as if the future is a haunted and unwholesome place. I

have become afraid of the future. I'd rather rest in the pages of history with my heroes than face such uncertainty, but these days I find no rest there. Their victories have become like accusations. "We played our part," they seem to say to me, "what will you do?"

I can't answer the question. Sometimes I think I'll drive myself crazy with trying.

Not that it would have mattered much if I could find the answer. I do not know what work I will be called to do in the future, but up until last month, I knew my place and that was with my grandmother. These years have been difficult and unsettling years for her too as one by one she surrendered her connection to her life and to those of us who had shared it with her. Her body weakened and her vision and hearing failed her. She lost her ability to walk, to stand, to sit up without assistance. She lost her ability to cook, to feed herself, and finally to swallow. Most painfully for us, she seemed to always be somewhere else, away from us. Days would go by without a word from her or even a smile. In our multi-generational home, her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren gathered around her, and year after year as she drifted away from us, we all drew closer. My mother retired early and dedicated herself to my grandmother's care. She even began to sleep on the floor beside Grandma's bed. My children grew up with the mandate that every decision must be made with their great-grandmother's needs and comforts in mind. Shawn and I together decided that whatever we pursued in life and career must honor her as the center of the family.

Through it all, I'd watch and read the news with a growing sense of dread. I became jealous of my grandmother who, with nearly a century behind her, had moved beyond all care for tomorrow. And I resented her too because in satisfying my duty to her, I felt I was neglecting my duty to the future. My career stalled. My writing stopped. It became more and more difficult to find time for my own children. And the more vulnerable she became, the more time she required of me, of all of us. My feelings about her became intense. I loved her and I resented her and I missed the person she had been and dreaded the loss of the person she had become.

For my entire life, she was my center. For eleven years I put my energy into ensuring that she could live with dignity. And then, despite all our best efforts, her dignity seemed to slip away. And then she was gone too. And I had a sermon to write.

I wanted to write of important things. I have chosen hymns and readings that focus on interpretations of the healing presence of the Divine in our midst. The gospel writers called it the Paraclete, which is sometimes translated as the Advocate. The early church referred to it as Holy Spirit. We have named this divinely immanent presence, the Inward Christ, the Holy Ghost, the Indwelling Spirit, "that of God," Holy Wisdom, Intercessor, Comforter, Helper, Beloved.

But this message is not about theology or the history of Christianity. I wanted it to be because I love that stuff, but I couldn't manage it. Our household is in disarray. My words also do not follow good order and they keep wandering. I find that they want to be with her.

I keep hearing her words in my head. "Now, look here!" she would say as she was always pointing out little details to us--a loose thread on a sweater, a bloom on an African violet, a jack-in-the-pulpit in the garden, an error in our grammar. I have a lot of stories about her and I'll be telling them all my life, I suppose. But if I had to choose one to tell you now it would be how she used to take me outside to show me the plants in her garden. My grandmother's garden was never going to win any awards for style, but I loved it. It was green and cool and full of interesting things. She was not a boastful gardener with flowers set to impress, as much as she was a steward of the lowly things. A tiny plant in a hidden place was as much a joy to her as any prize bloom.

Grandma never talked about God or Spirit. Strong emotion seemed beneath her dignity and spiritual matters were private. I don't know what she would think of all this church stuff, and I never asked. She was our matriarch, a sovereign and mighty force in our life surrounding us with houseplants and crocheted mittens and afghans and other signs, visible and invisible, of her love. To outsiders, it might have been difficult to see that love. In her affections as in her garden, you had to know what you were looking for. She was not going to gush over us, call us sweetheart, and bake us cookies. She was not *that* kind of grandmother. I knew she loved me because when I was little, she listened to me

with the same respect she would give an adult. I knew because she hung mirrors and towel-rings down low so that we kids could reach these handy tools of life without having to ask for help. I knew because if anyone teased one of us little ones, she would sternly defend the child with the words, "She is a *person!*"

I knew because when I shaved my head or wore it spiked and blue, when I stomped around in combat boots and was ornery and angry, she took it completely in stride. Her kids and grandkids (and there are a lot!) are gay and straight. They married people of different races, nations, and religions. Her family swirled around her as free-spirited artists, clear-thinking atheists, radicals, romantics, and fussbudgets. We moved through the fads and fashions, tragedies and triumphs of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood like cycling seasons. And whatever our condition, whatever our passions, whatever our place on the spectrum of life, she welcomed us back without question or condition. We were all persons, unique and changing, and always, *always* entirely acceptable and beloved in her eyes.

I think my grandmother was a little amused by my tendency to gild the lily. Her theology, and she would never use that word, was very basic. The Paraclete, the Holy Spirit that religious literature describes so mytho-poetically is really quite an ordinary and humble thing. It is, finally and simply, a presence that seems to be always there, though we hardly ever take the time to notice. It is the impetus, pathway, and action of love. It is the divine part of us. It makes humanity humane and informs the way we deal with death and grief and memory. It is Spirit seeking itself and finding it in the hidden places. It is what we learn from folks around us as they pass in and out of our lives--whether they are Jesus of Nazareth or Martin Luther King, or Prudence Mary Kregloh Flood of Phelps, NY.

It was difficult to wait with her in her last years. Like a little kid, I was restless and eager to run off and away, but instead I held her hand and followed her as before when we were together in her garden. As the silence grew around us and between us, it was still as if Grandma was saying, "Now, look here!" The woman who had taught me all I know about personal dignity and self was also teaching me how to let those things go.

Revelation can be a humble thing. The Apostle Paul and Dr. King found it in a jail cell. My grandmother spent her life seeing worth and divinity in small and humble places. It is a very human, and very holy thing to do. Look here. This is the stuff that justice is made of. This is where kindness grows. As I struggle to understand just how my life will continue without her in it, I keep encountering her lessons that it is not the success but the such-ness of life that deserves our attention. Do not mistake greatness for importance, power for strength, or piety for faith.

For nearly a hundred years, Prudence Flood was simply herself, dignified and stubborn and brilliant and irascible and kind. As far as I knew, there was never a time without her. Sometimes I wanted to set aside my duty to her and become important, to join the rush and hum of the world. But I had to wait until finally it was just Grandma, lying all small and still in the same bed in which her mother had given her birth and me beside her. The household around us continued to bustle and live, but Grandma and I were caught in a moment of blessed quietness when I told her that I loved her and she set her jaw in one final decision and was gone.

Now it seems that she and I are both free and I must decide now how to live in a troubled world without her. I do not know what I will do. I hesitate to bring so private a message to you. I feel selfish in doing so, but this is the only thing I could write. I have not yet received my new orders. I do not know what to do next. *"We wait in the quietness for some centering moment that will redefine, reshape, and refocus our lives,"* wrote Howard Thurman.

For my entire adult life, I have been my grandmother's apprentice and companion. I have dedicated these last several years to helping my mother, my poor mother! In the difficult task of her care. But that is all over now, and I do not see a way forward. I do not know what I am to do. Perhaps for the first time in my life, I feel ready to rest in faith, and in a faith I cannot understand or describe except to say that I do believe and I have known that a Comforter has come and does abide with us forever though we are sometimes too busy to notice. "Now," my grandmother would say, "Look here." The Beloved has been with us all along.

Silent Worship:

Fourth Hymn: Green 202 "Blessed Quietness"

Benediction: *Now.* Look *here.* The Comforter has come. Whatever tasks the world sets before you, whatever service of charity, peace, and grace you are called to fulfill, recall that you are not alone. There is that of God in each of us. Indeed the entire Universe shines with a holy light. But don't worry yourselves with the whole Universe. Look in the humble places first. Ordinary hours hold revelation. The Spirit of Truth and Light and Love is out there, but it is here too, quietly waiting for us.

Afterthoughts, Introductions, and Announcements

Musical Postlude

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