

‘When the Road Runs Out’ a sermon for the first Sunday after Christmas, preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Peg Pfab on Sunday 2 January 2022

So, here we are—the beginning of a new year. It is perhaps no accident that some of the lectionary readings today have to do with wisdom and light. Sometimes this past year it seemed the darkness was winning...the road had run out and the signposts ended. Here we are now on the cusp of a new year...without much to guide us as we try to navigate the future. Families, nations, the world are torn apart by response to COVID, to vaccines and mandates; torn apart by responses to climate change; poverty, homelessness; water rights. It often seems as if the whole world is divided into two---or more factions ...and all parties are digging in their heels; blaming and shaming those who disagree.

I am a great supporter of science, reason and logic but it seems when we try to think of how to unite disparate factions, reason is not enough. We run out of our usual signposts. Right now it seems the whole world is anxious, fearful and overwhelmed; the very worse situation in which to move into the future. No amount of research, reason or logic is going to bring together polarized groups in our world. What is left to us? We can take the road that continues into cynicism, despair and anger. Or perhaps we can take a road that leads to wisdom...to take the leap into a spiritual dimension that alone can heal these wounds of the world.

What I observe is that many people are searching for a spiritual dimension to life that offers hope and a way forward. People raised Christians now look to the wisdom of Buddhism, Sufism, nature religions; the spirituality of indigenous communities. All of these have much to enrich us all and in these days of fractured communities, can offer an experience of healing and connectedness.

At the same time I think it is sad that Christianity has often neglected its own rich tradition of wisdom and spirituality and has over emphasized cognitive knowledge at the expense of heart wisdom. But Christianity has a tradition of mystics, beginning with the teachings of Jesus. Sadly we have lost some of the understanding of Jesus as a wisdom teacher, a sage, as we focused on Jesus as Saviour from sin. ...

In an article adapted from the *Wisdom of Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind*, Episcopal priest, Cynthia Bourgeault says:

His (Jesus) message was not only one of repentance (at least in the usual way we understand it) Rather, he stayed close to the ground of wisdom: the transformation of human consciousness. He asked those timeless and deeply personal questions: What does it mean to die before you die? How do you go about losing your little life to find the bigger one? Is it possible to live on this planet with a generosity, abundance, fearlessness, and beauty that mirror Divine Being itself?

Are not these not compelling questions? When we are in conflict-- be it personal with families and friends...or political with polarized groups...how **DO** we live on this planet with

generosity, fearlessness and beauty? How do we “lose our little life” to find a bigger one? Is it possible to die to our own individual judgments and prejudices and grudges in order to open our hearts and understand someone who experiences life differently? Can we go beyond some of our rational arguments and find the spiritual dimension where we can connect with others and the wisdom and find a bigger life for all?

Whatever our views on vaccination, climate change, water rights...whenever we believe we have the **only** correct and righteous stance and it is simply a matter of convincing those other who are wrong...we will never be able to bring healing. Knowledge and intellect alone will not connect us. Don't we all...however conservative or progressive our views... need to think of how we live on this planet with a Light and Wisdom and generosity of soul that can mirror the Divine Being? How do we go about losing our little life; our personal ideologies to create a larger, more expansive life? Can we conceive of a spiritual dimension in which we are all connected...that can open us to finding shared understandings of life that might actually save us all? Can we actually be humble enough to admit that we can learn from those with whom we disagree?

Christian mystics have offered some glimpses of this way. Mister Eckhart, Julian of Norwich, Hildegard of Bingen are a few of the mystics whose writing, art and music we still have access to. And though they lived in very different times and situations, there are some bits of wisdom they share: the connectedness of all humankind with the Divine; humankind with the earth, and the deep experience of the Divine-- the Light with us always. I can't do justice to this rich tradition today, only offer a few of their words.

Juliana of Norwich might be especially relevant for us today: It is believed that she lost both her husband and her son to the Plague, she then entered and spent the rest of her life in a cloister, but she saw many people and offered them counsel through a window in her cell. At about age 30 she became very ill and almost died; but that was the beginning of her Revelations. In spite of all her challenges, she had an optimistic faith. She is best known for her saying 'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well'. Meister Eckhart, a German mystic who lived from 1260-1328 says: says, “Spirituality is not to be learned by flight from the world, or by running away from things, or by turning solitary and going apart from the world. Rather, we must learn an inner solitude wherever or with whomsoever we may be. We must learn to penetrate things and find God there.”

How can we find that inner solitude which makes it possible to understand those with whom we disagree? How do we cultivate that generosity of heart to learn from those with whom we disagree? Rather than reacting with anger and judgment to people who don't agree on vaccination or climate change...can we look deeply enough to see what might be underneath this position?

Might we understand that often there is a long-term experience of people feeling their concerns are not being heard? Or that people are reacting out of a very deep-seated fear? I personally find this very challenging. It is a lot easier of me to label and dismiss those, for example in my home country of the US, who are of a different political or religious ideology.

And yes there **are** some people I who are using this to hoard personal and economic power. But there are also a lot of folks who are simply afraid: afraid of this pandemic; terrorized by changes in the country; in the world. Offering logical or scientific reasons for them to not be afraid is useless when what is needed is compassion and deep listening and understanding of their fear.

When I get really frustrated, I think of my own fears: I am really afraid of water and hardly am able to swim after many lessons with great instructors. I am fine in a pool as long as my feet touch water...but otherwise I panic. No amount of reasoning or logic changes that. The only thing that helps is knowing people are there to hold me up if I begin to drown.

There is a great deal of fear and angst among many in our Western culture because they believe they will be left behind; hurt or abandoned. We need wisdom and spirituality to help us respond in ways that can heal the rifts.

The mystics also emphasized the connection of humanity with the earth and nature's cycles.

Hildegard of Bingen, a German mystic, found within her own experience of pain and illness a fertile ground for amazing creativity in art, music, healing. She was a composer; artist; scientist... compared the spiritual life with the nature's cycle of life: "The Word is living, being, spirit, all verdant greening, all creativity." And, "The earth which sustains humanity must not be injured. It must not be destroyed!"

Isn't this what Jesus tried to teach? How did Jesus, how did the mystics, actually find that inner solitude or that experience of living in the Light? We know that Jesus often went off alone in nature to find that inner space of connection with the Divine. The mystics and Jesus found that connection through prayer; meditation; a willingness to undergo a very challenging self-reflection and discipline ...a strong connection to the earth and creation and a sense of joy in life.

I have to confess that personally I have not been very good at a regimented schedule of prayer and meditation. I might say that is because I am too much of a free spirit...or just that I am stubborn...maybe both. I don't know how it is for you to develop a deeper spiritual life. But I DO believe that being in community helps us to develop our spiritual dimension.

That's one of the reason I am so passionate about pastoral care and building community and connections within church: small groups where we might not only read the mystics but also meditate together; where we connect and care for each other's pains and share each other's joys...where we share light and hope and wisdom.

I think it is pretty hard to find wisdom alone.

But we can help each other to find laughter and joy even in the midst of fear and uncertainty and pain; help each other to respond to others with compassion and understanding rather than shaming and blaming. We can support policies and laws that protect the whole community and the earth without demonizing all who disagree.

Isn't one of deepest fears the fear that we are alone in the face of pain and loss and uncertainty? What can give us inner wisdom and peace is falling into that deep solitude in which we are all connected to each other; to the earth; to the Divine Light. Therein is the road to Wisdom and Generosity and courage and hope, even within the pain. That is what Hildegard means when she says, "All will be well; all will be well. All manner of things will be well." Not that we will all get what we want...but that we can live in joy with what we have.

This is our challenge as we move into move into 2022, is it not? We can approach it with the same old arguments and conflicts...or take a leap into the spiritual dimension to live on this planet with a generosity, abundance, fearlessness, and beauty that mirror Divine Being itself.

When the road runs out and the signposts end we are not left with nothing. We are left upheld and enfolded by the Wisdom and Light of the Spirit's love. In closing I invite you to reflect on this quote from Meister Eckhart:

"And suddenly, you know: It's time to start something new and trust the magic of beginnings." May it be so.

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