

The Sunday Missive – May 14, 2023
The Sixth Sunday in Eastertide

Hymn 516 Come down, O Love divine

Come down, O Love divine, seek thou this soul of mine,
And visit it with thine own ardor glowing;
O Comforter, draw near, within my heart appear,
And kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

O let it freely burn, till earthly passions turn
To dust and ashes in its heat consuming;
And let thy glorious light shine ever on my sight,
And clothe me round, the while my path illuming.

And so the yearning strong, with which the soul will long,
Ahall far outpass the power of human telling;
For none can guess its grace, till Love create a place
Wherein the Holy Spirit makes a dwelling.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6HPKL1wOVXk>

The Collect of the Day

O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. **Amen.**

Acts 17:22-31

Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he

served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’

Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Psalm 66

Bless our God, O you peoples* ***Make the voice of praises to be heard.***

The one who holds our souls in life* ***And will not allow our timid feet to slip.***

For you, O God, have proved us* ***You have tried us just as silver is tried.***

At first you brought us into the snare* ***You laid heavy burdens upon our backs.***

Enemies rode over our heads; we went through fire and water* ***But then you brought us to a place of refreshment.***

So I will enter your house with burnt-offerings* ***And will pay you all my vows.***

The promises I made with my lips* ***And spoke with my mouth when I was in trouble.***

Come and listen, all you who fear the Lord* ***I will tell you what God has done for me.***

I called out to the Lord with my mouth* ***God's praise was on my tongue.***

If I had evil in my heart* ***The Lord would not have heard me.***

But in truth God has heard me* ***And has attended to the voice of my prayer.***

Blessed be God, who has not rejected my prayer* ***Nor withheld any love from me.***

1 Peter 3:13-22

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated, but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil. For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you-- not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Lift Every Voice and Sing Hymn 87 More love to thee O Christ

More love to thee, O Christ, more love to thee!
Hear thou the prayer I make on bended knee;
This is my earnest plea;
More love, O Christ, to Thee; more love to thee, more love to thee!

Once earthly joy I craved, sought peace and rest;
Now thee alone I seek, give what is best;
This all my prayer shall be: [Refrain]

Then shall my every breath sing out your praise;
This be the only song my heart shall raise;
This still my prayer shall be: [Refrain]

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fP4PXS_vSAw

John 14:15-21

Jesus said, "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. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

To an Unknown God or Gods -- Easter 6A

This morning I am reminded of an amazing experience I had some years ago: The immense good fortune of a sojourn with my daughter Eve in Sri Lanka, with its beautiful and complicated culture. Sri Lanka is full of temples and shrines, some Hindu, but mostly Buddhist, especially in the southern two thirds of the country, where we were.

The oldest and, most would agree, most unchanged form of the Buddhist way of life is centered here, and its presence was very much heightened during our visit. Every year the people celebrate Vesak, the date when Gautama the Buddha is said to have been born. Just by coincidence, he also achieved enlightenment – Nirvana -- on the same calendar day and this too became the day of his death. It's as if we were to celebrate Christmas, Pentecost and Easter together on the same day every year. The country is festooned with colorful flags and lanterns, and the temples are full of revelers and worshippers. It is a glorious time.

Statues of the Buddha are everywhere, big, little and in-between; carved stone, painted wood and gold-leafed. Thinking that these images were a big part of the establishment of Buddhism, we were surprised to learn that it was the Greek Alexander the Great who brought to Asia the idea of depicting holy figures. Previous to Western influence, all the Asian gods were unknown gods, in the sense that Paul uses in his sermon today. He is said to have spoken these words on a high, holy rock, the Aereopagus in Athens, where justice was said to have been considered and meted out since before history.

Paul tells his listeners of the God who made the world and everything in it, who is Lord of heaven and earth, who made from one ancestor all nations to inhabit the whole earth, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. The immense disparity between our culture and those of Asia obscures the ways in which we are alike. In Sri Lanka, for example, one is never far from the Buddha, because the Buddha is made up of human history – a life (in his case an ongoing series of lives), in an overwhelming profusion of depictions, as well as in the temporal observance of holy days like Vesak. But at the same time, the Buddha is understood as being beyond and outside of human history: always having been and always to be, always unattainable, immortal, invisible one only wise: at once inimitable and yet ever residing within each of those who strive to live and move and have their being like him.

Jesus teaches us today such a similar worldview, that it becomes strenuous to the point of absurdity to claim we are not ourselves one

with everyone else on this earth: “They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by God, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” God does not reside in gold, or silver, or stone, images formed by the art and imagination of mortals, but those images can indeed serve to refresh our fragile awareness that God’s commandments are the same the World over: Justice, Peacemaking, Lovingkindness, Humility, Forbearance, Release. And we can indeed take back the lesson Alexander took to Asia so long ago: that in acknowledging and nurturing the holiness of beauty, we become more able to embrace the beauty of holiness.

The God preached by Paul is one god, creator of all. Certainly the Jews already believed this. But his sermon that day was preached to a different audience: gentiles. In this case, they were Greeks who worshipped so many gods that they included a spare one in case one of them got overlooked and took offense. Paul’s message is the good news that there is only one God, of whom Jesus is living proof. This God is the one “In whom we live and move and have our being,” as the Greek poet Epimenides observed. This is the one God in whose likeness we are made and likewise humanity proceeds from one stock – a truth that powermongers throughout history continue to deny.

We are characterized by the activity of thought: consciousness. Why we try to worship is because, knowing we owe our existence as conscious beings to an untraceable moment in evolution when some upright hominid realized she had a choice between passion and compassion. We’ve been stuck with that continuous choosing ever since. We all know it brings us both blessings and curses – not just because the Bible tells us so, but from experience. But on the whole we’re glad that Garden of Eden moment happened when humankind emerged from the dusty crowd to take on the stewardship of Creation for better or for worse. On the whole, yes. Even though all too often, we would choose passion when we know compassion is the better way for all. Even though there seems to be a preponderance of people prone to self-centered passion over peace. Even though choosing compassion can get us hurt.

We are glad to be alive and capable of choice, and so we give thanks. God so loved humanity that he gave us the world as our responsibility, our challenge, our playground, that whosoever nurtures compassion will be part of the solution. And then God so loved the world that she gave us herself as Jesus to help us learn how to do it without giving up when we fail. The Buddhists call it Karma: our eternal life is based on our intentions in this one.

But how to do this? The reason so many early followers of Jesus denounced the practice of depicting deities – one of the central departures of the Abrahamic faiths from those which came before – is because we know it is impossible to depict the invisible, unknowable, immeasurable cosmic force that is goodness. How do you carve or paint the One who is everything?

Nevertheless, we are given to raising our voices in song and prayer and re-enacting the drama of Christ, because the experience of doing so is the nearest thing to heaven we have seen. It's why Jesus was a carpenter... that, and the reality that working in the house Jesus built is the only form of worship we can truly know. Art and liturgy depict our senses of God; they can never depict God. The house Jesus built is the house Jesus was and is and ever shall be, the body of Christ's very self.

So let us raise our voices and lift up our hearts in expressions of gratitude, adulation and purpose. But let us also acknowledge that the only true form of godly praise is selfless tolerance and encouragement of others in peaceful pursuits; the only direct address we can ever make to whatever God there may be is with hands and hearts upheld in loving intention. Words help, music and art help even more, actions taken can lead to betterment; but the truest of worship is in the thoughts of our hearts and the choices we make -- of which ones to steer by and which to let die.

Here is some inspiration for not giving up, adapted from Ada Limón:

More than the fuchsia funnels breaking out of the crabapple tree, more than my neighbor's riotous display of cherry limbs shoving their cotton candy-colored blossoms into the slate sky of Spring rains, it's the greening of the trees that really gets to me. When

all the luscious blossomings leave our pathways strewn with the confetti of aftermath, the leaves come. Patient, plodding, a green skin growing over whatever winter did to us, a return to the strange idea of continuous living despite the mess of us, the hurt, the empty. Fine then, I'll take it, the tree seems to say, a new slick leaf unfurling like a fist to an open palm, I'll take it all.

Hymn 291 We plough the fields and scatter

We plough the fields, and scatter the good seed on the land,
But it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand;
He sends the snow in winter, the warmth to swell the grain,
The breezes and the sunshine, and soft refreshing rain.
All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above;
Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord for all his love.

He only is the Maker of all things near and far;
He paints the wayside flower, he lights the evening star;
The wind and waves obey him, by him the birds are fed;
Much more to us, his children, he gives our daily bread.
All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above;
Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord for all his love.

We thank thee, then, O Father, for all things bright and good,
The seedtime and the harvest, our life, our health, our food:
The gifts we have to offer are what thy love imparts,
But chiefly thou desirest our humble, thankful hearts.
All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above;
Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord for all his love.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QTejKRYz1FE>

OR

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2mURti-s0jc>

People

No people are uninteresting.
Their fate is like the chronicle of planets.
Nothing in them is not particular,
as planet is dissimilar from planet.

And if a man lived in obscurity
making his friends in that obscurity,
obscurity is not uninteresting.

To each his world is private,
and in that world one excellent minute.
And in that world one tragic minute.
These are private.

In any man who dies there dies with him
his first snow and kiss and fight. It goes with him.

There are left books and bridges
and painted canvas and machinery.
Whose fate is to survive.

But what has gone is also not nothing:
by the rule of the game something has gone.
Not people die but worlds die in them.

Whom we knew as faulty, the earth's creatures
Of whom, essentially, what did we know?
Brother of a brother? Friend of friends? Lover of lover?

We who knew our fathers in everything, in nothing.
They perish. They cannot be brought back.
The secret worlds are not regenerated.

And every time again and again
I make my lament against destruction.

Yevgeny Yevtushenko