

May 19, 2024

Pr. Steve

Texts: Acts 2: 1-21; Romans 8: 22-27; John 15: 26-27, 16: 5-13

In the name of God, Abba/Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

We are always welcome at church, and the longings that draw us are incredibly important. But we are never to imagine that we know what's going to happen here—I don't care how many decades you've been coming.

To be in the presence of the Holy One, the spirit of Truth is always awakening, stirring, sometimes close to frightening, isn't it? And the deepest compassion we will ever experience. *'I want you,'* God says. *'I want you—fully alive, awake, whole. I want you.'*

On Mount Sinai, 50 days after their liberation, the mountain trembling, the people fearful, seeing the voice of God—and God says, *'I set you free. Do you remember me? Do you remember me?'* And he gives them the Ten Things—they're not commandments—the Ten Things you've got to know, and says, *'If we live in this Covenant relationship, then Israel will become a light to all the nations.'*

Christian life is not about rituals, or philosophy and theology. It's about a return to personhood, to becoming truly, freely alive human beings, through the person of Jesus—who is not sitting on the periphery of some cloud with a few indications about how life might work out—but is here in our midst, in the midst of the craziness, and the contradictoriness of human life, experiencing life, suffering, death, and beyond. Not some imaginary figure, not some archetype dancing in the heavens—here. And he knows what we're like, at our worst and our best, and says, *'I want you. I want you alive, genuine, free.'* And he opens up our hearts to do it.

However, last time I checked, we're still floundering. I had this image this week of the whole of humanity like fish flip-flopping on the banks of a river or a lake, who can't get back into the water. Right? That's what we're all doing. It's this very strange dance. But it's everywhere. It's everywhere.

Oh, we've lost center. We don't know where to turn. Is there any hope in the future? Well, at least we're still good at selling things. Yes, the marketing world is going well. (Ask Moriah.) Amazon is off the charts. In fact, we can even sell spirituality! *'Have I got a deal for you! How much money do you have? I'll sell you what you need.'*

I love this story from Suzuki Roshi, founder of the Zen Center in San Francisco. Years ago, one of his students came to him and said, *'Roshi, I think I've got it. I can now sit for long periods of time with my legs crossed, and my knees don't hurt anymore, and my back is straight, and I can follow my breath for long periods of time. Is there anything else?'*

And Suzuki Roshi got 6 inches from his face, and he screamed with everything he had, *"It's not about breathing!!"*

Did he just kill our favorite spiritual mantra? *'Breathe, breathe.'* We put it on our bumper stickers. How can the Roshi say breathing is not where it's at? **Because it's not.** It's a means to an end—isn't it—to a deeper connection, to that fullness of life, to enlightenment, to a state of being we can't even imagine. *It's a means of connection. Don't get stuck on the techniques.*

That's how people get stuck in worship where you're supposed to be a nice person—a kind person if you're a Christian—and just try to put up with all kinds of stuff, and 'Say you're sorry', and... Who needs that?

We need people who are real, and genuine—and when we're angry, we're angry. And when we love, we love, and everything in between. Because love is where it's at. Love is what makes us real.

God can only be known by loving. Our Scriptures are filled to overflowing with that, and still we end up focusing on that '*judgmental God who's out to get us*', '*the Supreme accountant in the sky who's tracking every sin you've made.*' (Mary, give up now! Wow, why do we let sinners in here?)

No, God can only be known by loving. That's it. Love which is fascination, curiosity, exploration, mind—heart—soul—body, every aspect of our being. Love which is solidarity and commitment. Love which is Mercy, that ineffable, inexplicable capacity upon which our lives depend. Love is never fluffy. '*we just can't be generous with other people about mercy, can we? Please don't press me to be merciful. I need it—maybe not you. I'm pretty clear about that.*'

And it is love which leads us to communion with all life. Not just our own kind—whatever that is—communion with the whole of life, and with the Earth, and with creativity and possibility. And Jesus says so clearly in the text today, '*I must go so that the Paraclete, the Advocate, the One who's always for you will come—that Spirit of Truth upon which life depends.*' [John 16: 7-13]

And we are living in such a banal time. We debate if there is truth, or 'it's just your own truth' or 'make up a truth that you like'. Wow, we have come to the bottom of the barrel.

The Spirit is being sent to you to bring us to life, that Spirit of inspiration, the Spirit of resistance. We hear it from all the students on the campuses these days, don't we now? '*No, we will not put up with your lies. No, that is not the truth about what's going on in Gaza and Palestine. No.*' We need backbone. Yeah, we do.

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**God is within us.** That's what the Gospel is saying today—our personhood is where God lives within us—within everyone, not just the Christians—within us. And we live—living within God—if we nurture the capacity to wake up, become aware, to cultivate that compassion which is longing for us to become whole and free and beautiful as we are, as we are.

And when that happens, then these incredible texts come to life. '*It is your young people who will prophesy and have visions*' [Acts 2: 17] and they're doing it today, aren't they? We need to pay attention to Andro, and Parker, and Spencer, and Mei. Sure they're still confused, right? But that's okay. That's okay. Listen.

'*And then the elders will dream dreams.*' [Acts 2: 17] It's very popular for people to say today, 'Well, ours is an older congregation now.' Are you kidding me? We're so lucky—we've got elders who can dream dreams—because that's what's needed.

*'And even the slaves will find their voice.'* [Acts 2: 18] Isn't that happening today? People we've written off, people of color, gay people, wherever you want to go, immigrants, refugees. Their voices are being heard. We need to listen.

And then, it is the fondest dream of the Universe to catch a glimpse of real, live sons and daughters of God. That's what everybody wants. The whole universe is longing for that—to see people embodying a compassion, and a wisdom, which draws us all together, which blesses the wholeness, which wants joy in life. The fondest dream—just a glimpse of real people. Every now and then, do you get one? Ah, it changes reality.

And those same people, the real ones (don't you love this in the text), they groan. [Romans 8:22] Oh, we're all getting good at groaning, aren't we these days? Oh, I'd love to have us (you know me), I'd love to have us all groan together right now. Wouldn't that be great? The problem is—it wouldn't stop for half an hour. So, I'm not going to do that.

But the Earth is groaning with us in ways we've never heard before, isn't it? And it is the Spirit who takes these groans (that's your most honest prayers) and translates them for God to hear, who can work with the stirring of even our own groanings [Romans 8: 26-27], and turn what appears to be hopeless—turn these times into birth pains, like a woman about to give birth—so that the new can emerge within the shell of the old, and all can be set free by wisdom, and grace, and mercy which we need.

*'I want you, alive, celebrating, committed, steadfast, and true,'* says God to us today.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

The peace which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.