
The Continuity of Love

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Harkins
Proper 17 – Year B

In the Name of the God of Creation, who loves us all. Amen.

Good morning, and welcome to the Cathedral on this fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost. We are so glad you have chosen to spend part of your Labor Day weekend with us, and we hope you have found or will find a home here among us!

In the Gospel appointed for today, we have a dialogue that may on the surface seem alien to us, with its surface theme of physical holiness and its connection to our religious practices. In one sense this is like being invited into a family squabble and it can be tempting to excuse oneself and quietly exit. To do so would be to miss the deeper message here, however—a message about choosing and living out what it means to be in right relationship, respecting the dignity of every human being, and treating others with kindness and respect. And this starts with taking a look at oneself, being mindful of our own, sometimes egotistical desires, and keeping the welfare of the common good in focus, and as the ultimate goal of our core values.

Lately, thanks to my colleague Martha Sterne, I've been re-reading Eudora Welty's wonderful book *The Optimist's Daughter*. Maybe you remember the story. It is the memoir of Laurel McKelva Hand, a woman in her mid-forties, trying to come to terms with the deaths of all those she has most loved in life: her mother, her father, and her husband Phil, who was killed in World War II. At one point in the novel, Laurel remembers a train ride she took with her then fiancé Phil, from Chicago, Illinois to Mount Salus, Mississippi, where they were to be married. Miss Welty writes:

When they were climbing the long approach to a bridge after leaving Cairo, rising slowly higher until they rode above the tops of bare trees, she looked down and saw the pale light widening and the river bottoms opening out, and then the water appearing, reflecting the low, early sun. There were two rivers. Here was where they came together. This was the confluence of the waters, the Ohio and the Mississippi.

All they could see was sky, water, birds, light, and confluence. It was the whole morning world....And they themselves were part of the confluence. Their own joint act of faith had brought them here at the very moment and matched its occurrence, and proceeded as it proceeded. Direction itself was made beautiful, momentous. They were riding as one with it, right up front. It's our turn! she'd thought exultantly. And we're going to live forever.

Left bodiless and graveless of a death made of water and fire in a year long gone, Phil could tell her of her life. For her life, any life, she had to believe, was nothing but the continuity of its love.

Oh, my. Such lovely writing, and in the last line I quoted, about how any life is “nothing but the continuity of its love,” there is a deep and abiding connection to the Gospel for today. And I find myself drawn to that one word Miss Welty used repeatedly, “confluence,” a noun meaning “a flowing together of two or more streams; the point of juncture of such streams; the combined stream formed by this juncture; a tributary.” Confluence is not a religious word; you won't find it anywhere in the Bible. Nevertheless, the stories of our faith are filled with moments of confluence – the place or point in time in which God and human beings come together. In the text for today that confluence was a call to search our hearts, and to mindfully breathe new life in to our practices and disciplines so they sustain and nurture those things that lead to

life-giving results.

I believe Jesus is calling us in this text to lives of integrity—the Latin root is “integritas,” and my favorite interpretation of this is “wholeness.” After all, we get similar words such as “integers,” or whole numbers, and “integrate,” to bring together into whole cloth, from this same Latin root. In responding as he does to the Pharisees—and in referring as he does to the heart, thought to be the center of one’s capacity for courage and compassion—Jesus is asking us to consider the heart of our own faith and tradition, and the practices and disciplines that sustain it in wholeness. What activities, ritual and otherwise, help us be in right relationship with our neighbors, practicing hospitality, and grace? What allows us to maintain and deepen what theologian Paul Tillich referred to as “self-integration,” that process of finding our center of spiritual health and moral integrity? For Tillich this corresponded to a therapeutic model familiar to pastoral counselors... that one’s spiritual health is the wholeness of a person’s center, the ground of one’s being. In this sense, Jesus may be asking us to pay attention not so much to what we eat, or to Levitical laws, but rather to ask what may be eating us. The family therapist and rabbi Edwin Friedman once said; “grief that is not transformed gets transmitted.” So often, as a clinician, I see the effects of swallowing grief, or anger, or fear, rather than transforming them into life-giving possibilities. And come to that, how might we understand in a new way that when we celebrate the Eucharist—as we will in just a moment—we do so sharing in time and space that first Eucharist, and this one here and now, and all those to come, as if time is in those moments is standing still, which in fact it is doing. And in that moment, as Dean Candler has often said, we are invited to leave at the altar those things which might keep us in bondage, and embrace the wholeness of our common humanity in Christ. I hear Jesus’ familiar and comforting words, I have called you friends...yes once again, but I am not the same person who heard them before. As Nobel Laureate and poet Czeslaw Milosz says,

Love means to learn to look at yourself
The way one looks at distant things
For you are only one thing among many.
And whoever sees that way heals his heart,
Without knowing it, from various ills—
A bird and a tree say to him: Friend.

Then he wants to use himself and things
So that they stand in the glow of ripeness.
It doesn’t matter whether he knows what he serves:
Who serves best doesn’t always understand.

This is the journey of the Paschal mystery, and the hope of the strength, courage, and resilience to abide with one another in love. It’s what gives us space to celebrate the Eucharist at this table, and to wish our Jewish brothers and sister a blessed Rosh Hashanah, because when we heal our heart as Milosz suggests we are not trapped in dualistic, binary ways of being in the world. Rather than either/or, it’s both/and. Rather than a theology of scarcity, we practice abundance, an abundance on full display in the passage from the Song of Solomon we heard just now. Let’s promise not to let our religious practices become so entrenched and mundane that we have forgotten the deeper, life-giving meaning to which they point.

There is a lovely African American spiritual, the words of which go something like this: “Deep River, My home is over Jordan. Deep river, Lord. I want to cross over into campground.” Campground is that home where we make choices that lead to the confluences of the continuity of love, to use Eudora Welty’s lovely language. There, we seek to live lives of integrity, and be faithful to our Baptismal Covenant to respect the dignity of every human being, and in so doing mindfully reflect God’s loving intentions for all of humanity. It is that place from which we extend compassion, and thereby open ourselves to deeper understandings of who we are in relationship to God, self and other. Together, my sisters and brothers, we can do this with courage—with heart—and without building walls that would keep out those who are different from ourselves. After all, any life is nothing but the continuity of its love. On this Eudora Welty, and Jesus, agree. Amen.