

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

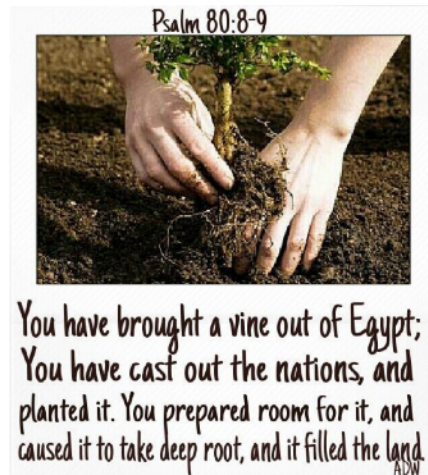
Sunday, August 14, 2022

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Rev Dr Scott Couper

“One Who Has No ‘Why’”

Christian Scripture: Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19



Here in our faith community, we have cause to pause. As we mourn the loss of Sandy, Clyde Johnson's partner we are able to reflect on how one can be able and willing to honor and devotedly serve another 'in sickness and in health'. I hope to pray with Clyde this afternoon. As we sit alongside the bed of Bob Keller this week, we contemplate how one can be a gentle, peaceful, loving, and genuine soul in the midst of a world full of turmoil and constant contestation. I hope to read a devotion with Bob tomorrow before I depart on leave. As we visit Blessed Ngoma and Julia Dueso in Keene, who suffer yet another illness to their family in the form of dual COVID contractions, one wonders how far down can the

resources of resilience be drawn, from what depth can we who suffer draw hope and inspiration? I hope to bring Julia and Blessed some food this afternoon.

In this space we call a sanctuary, when we pause we can take refuge in the spiritual wisdom of those who go before us: the Psalmist, Allen Myrick, Meister Eckhart, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and just so recently, Amer Latif.

In our scripture reading this morning, the Psalmist expressed a 'lament'. The Psalm articulated a profound sadness to what happens to people and a community in the midst of suffering. The Psalmist was dejected over the defeat and loss of the northern kingdom, of a region known as Samaria. The northern tribes were captured and sent into exile by the Assyrians. The Psalmist asked God, "Why have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass by pick its grapes" (Psalm 80:12)? The Psalmist cried for God to save Israel and Judah, that at least a remnant 'branch' from a 'vine' originally planted may be saved and that all might be restored, or as we heard last week, might be made 'whole'.¹

In his beautiful poem, 'No Why' (1993), a beautiful saint of our church Allen Myrick wrote, "In the life of God there is no 'Why'. We wish there were – we have so much to ask: "“Why do children die in war?’ ‘Why do drought and flood destroy?’ ‘Why does God enrich one life but leave another poor?’” Allen

¹ Geoffrey Grogan, *Psalms: The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 143-144.

continued his prose, “But ‘why?’ produces no reply, it echoes in our dark”. Allen then asked other questions that also do not hear a response: “‘Why seek that Love which yearns for you?’ ‘Why walk the pilgrim road of faith?’ ‘Why live for others, not self?’” In his poem, Allen offered no response to the questions ‘why is there tragedy and sadness’ and ‘why do we seek to demonstrate do right and be faithful?’. Yet, the conclusion of Allen’s poem explains why there are no answers to these questions: “You seek or live or love you know not why, except you’re drawn by ‘*magnet Love*’ which sets its heart on loving you and will not rest until you live within the light you do not see, within the trust you cannot probe, within the One who has no ‘why’”.

Allen’s poem that encourages us to “live without a ‘why’” echoes much of the Bible’s wisdom literature found in the books of Job, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. The mantra ‘to live without a “why”’ simply advocates that we as people of faith ought **often pause** to live without an agenda, to temporarily cease engagement in secular repair [politics] or to religious pleasings [‘works righteousness’], and to be as God is with Creation and in love.

Allen’s poem is inspired by the spirituality of Johannes Eckhart von Hocheim (ca. 1260-1328), a medieval Dominican friar and respected theologian and philosopher, often known simply as ‘Meister Eckhart’. Meister Eckhart was a mystic theologian whose “writings and sermons are all centered on God and

detachment from all that is not God”.² I am far from a mystic theologian. (In fact, this message is a bit out of my preferred homiletical ‘genre’ and thus outside my normal repertoire). Yet, what I understand from Meister Eckhart and Allen is simply the lesson **“to be full of things is to be empty of God, while to be empty of things is to be full of God”**.³ In a text entitled *About Disinterest*, Eckhart advocated what is often referred to as a ‘spirituality of subtraction’, wherein our spirituality is not based on a transactional cause and effect – a ‘we did this, so God does that’ and a ‘God did that, so we do this’ theology. We hear hints of this kind of theology in the Psalmists asking “Why?” and pleading “Please do”. Rather than a transactional and a ‘what can you do for me’ relationship, Eckhart and Allen challenge us to go to an ‘Inner Quiet’ where we let go of our willfulness and allow God to seep within and through us so that our being is that of God’s – at peace and in love. Eckhart eloquently wrote, **“He who lives in the goodness of [God’s] nature, lives in God’s love; and love has no ‘why’”**.⁴ If we are able to live in this contemplative way, our response to the world will not even be a ‘response’ as

² James McFadden, “Meister Eckhart: Living Without a Why”, November 30, 1999. Found at: <https://www.catholicireland.net/meister-eckhart-living-without-a-why/>, accessed August 14, 2022.

³ Raymond Bernard Blakney, *Meister Eckhart* (New York: Harper & Row, 1941), 85. Found in: James McFadden, “Meister Eckhart: Living Without a Why”, November 30, 1999. Found at: <https://www.catholicireland.net/meister-eckhart-living-without-a-why/>, accessed August 14, 2022.

⁴ *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, Paul Szarmach, ed., (Albany: University of New York Press, 1984), 253. Found in: James McFadden, “Meister Eckhart: Living Without a Why”, November 30, 1999. Found at: <https://www.catholicireland.net/meister-eckhart-living-without-a-why/>, accessed August 14, 2022.

such, but we will be as God is loving the Creation and others. In another writing entitled *The Counsel of Discernment*, Meister Eckhart explained that **“It is not what we do that makes us holy, but we ought to make holy that which we do”**.⁵

We have heard of this ‘theology of subtraction’ before when the benevolent and inspirational Muslim scholar Amer Latif addressed us a few weeks ago. Amer taught us about bringing our ‘nothingness to God’. We learned from Amer that Shames of Tabriz, a friend and mentor to Rumi, taught what is really is the ultimate in monotheism: a believe that all that was, is, and will always be is through the power of God *alone* and hence, we need to *at times* lose ourselves, shed our egos, abandon our own wants, needs, cravings, agendas, and passions. Amer fused this theology with that of Jesus the Christ who held that it is God *alone* who inspires, strengthens, and equips us to do anything and thus is it is God who does all things. Remember? Amer reminded us of Jesus’ teaching to the Young Rich Prince (Luke 18:18-23). The Rich Young Prince asked Jesus what must he do to enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus first responded, “Why do you call me good? *Only* God is good”. After telling the lesson, Jesus stated to his disciples that “For you and for all others, it is not possible to enter the kingdom of God, but for

⁵ *An Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, Paul Szarmach, ed., (Albany: University of New York Press, 1984), 253. Found in:

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God [alone] it is possible".⁶ Amer taught that the ultimate conclusion in monotheism that conceives of God as omnipotent and omnipresent renders even the state of you and I loving God as only a consequence of God loving us; causality collapses. And we with God become one - just what Jesus prayed for in the Garden of Gethsemane (John 17:21).

Friends, in honor of our brothers and sisters who are studying the life and ministry of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and our brother Matt Deen (who as part of his ministerial training preparing him for ordained ministry is reading Bonhoeffer), I would like to share with you a quote from the text *Life Together*. Bonhoeffer wrote, **"The person who loves their dream of community will destroy community, but the person who loves those around them will create community"**.⁷ This message, in part inspired by the contemplative tradition, is instructive to me as the minister of this church and to our Long-Range Planning Team led so ably by April Harkness and Bob Pu. The church Council knows every month I prepare a four-page report (curbed from a verbose seven pages after wise counsel from Jack Bixby) telling members how extremely busy I have been (this many events, that many pastoral visits, etc...). But, in and of itself, is that report indicative of my love for this community and for each and every one of you?

⁶ Amer Latif, "In Praise of Nothingness", Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, July 17, 2022.

⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1962).

Perhaps not. Finance and Endowment committees seek to be worthy stewards of the resources given by generations before us. Yet, in the portfolios and transactions, in the withdrawals, and spreadsheets, does love dwell in them? For Buildings & Grounds: Is the love of God present in the maintenance schedules, meetings, and consultations with and quotes from contractors? Yes, to a large extent, I believe the love of God is present with the members of our faith community's various instrumentalities and with me. Yet, our agendas, reports, meetings, and minutes are not *indicative* of God's love. In fact, we may be blessed with, by, and through God's love in spite of them.

In this morning's reading, the Psalmist concluded, "Restore us, O Lord God Almighty, make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved" (Psalm 80:19). Yet, perhaps God whispers to the psalmist, 'You are already restored. My face already shines upon you. You are already saved. Therefore, accept my love. Go forth and demonstrate your restoration, your light, and your salvation'.

This was the word of God. And it was preached to the people of God. And the people of God responded, "Amen".