

San Lorenzo Community Church, United Church of Christ
Sermon: Yellow Theology (Sun, Fire, Warmth, Light)
From Rev. Annette J. Cook
Sunday, May 21, 2017

Hear a reading from the Gospel of John 14:15-21.

¹⁵ "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Creator, and she will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees her nor knows her. You know her, because she abides with you, and she will be in you.

¹⁸ "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹ In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰ On that day you will know that I am in my Creator, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹ They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Creator, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."

This ends the reading from the Gospel of John. Thanks be to God.

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This past week I have been in the hot, humid, rainy and dripping with sweat town of San Antonio, Texas. I attended the Festival of Homiletics. There were over 1,800 preachers at this conference which was all about preaching.

Every day held two or three worship services – so we got to hear two or three sermons in a worship setting every day -- plus three lectures and two workshops every day. If you had the stamina, you could attend the conference event from 7:30 in the morning (starting with yoga devotion) to 8:30 at night (with the conclusion of the last speaker).

It dawned on me at about the second day of the conference that we – this group of 1,800 people – we are the weirdest people on the planet. Every day we walked past the Alamo – the famous site of American history – a place where thousands of tourists and school children arrive to hear the stories of this country. And instead, we chose to spend our time to hear three sermons a day. Who does that, right?

I can hear you all inwardly moaning right now! Am I right? It feels like a life-time sentence, doesn't it? It feels like a punishment of sorts – “and for your sins, you will be sentenced to hearing three sermons a day.”

Yet, here's the thing, this event was rich and deep; it was challenging and motivating; it was terrifying and inspiring. And now I get to come back and start terrifying and inspiring you . . . or get as close to it as I can.

Yes, being a preacher is indeed a weird thing. I have to have enough confidence in what I am saying that I can express an authentic and real understanding of God – you all will certainly know if I am faking it -- and yet I also have to have enough humility to know that if something is going to happen, if something is going to get stirred up or started, if your heart is going to crack open or your hands start to itch with the need to do something, well, none of this is my doing. Once I start talking, it is all in God's hands.

It occurs to me that I will always get the blame if things go off the rails in my sermons and God will get the credit if a seed gets planted. Hmm. Does that seem fair to you? Talk about being hung out to dry. Talk about “the cheese stands alone.” Do you ever feel that way?

You know. You used to be a family, or you were a team of colleagues all on the same project or you used to feel the robust presence of full pews and lots of volunteers for all of the jobs that need to be done. Or you were a tight circle of friends and then, something changed. Each of your children grew up and left home, moved out on their own. A joy of successful parenting, for sure, and still a painful moment. Because there you are. All alone.

Of course you know what I mean. It is the fear you feel when you lose a loved one who played an important role – maybe the most important role in your life. Whether that loss is because someone moved away or someone died or maybe the relationship just fell apart. It is the sense of being lost and out at sea when we have suffered from a broken friendship or an angry exchange with a neighbor or a spouse. You are vulnerable, afraid. You turned around to discover you are alone, maybe even isolated. You don't want to be orphaned, but that's what it feels like.

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Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
A long ways from home,
A long ways from home.

They were sitting at the dinner table, having just shared a lovely meal on the second floor of the building with a view over the hills and valleys. They had laughed and talked. They told stories about many of the people they had met in their most recent tour, as they came together as a group. And now Jesus was talking his crazy talk again and telling them that he would be leaving. He would no longer be with the disciples. Without saying the words, they just knew Jesus was talking about his own death.

You can feel the panic start to fill the room as one disciple after the other contemplates what this really means – that the one who has been leading them is leaving; the purpose of the group doesn't change but the leadership does and now there is a void. Now this ragtag group who can barely agree on anything will be going it alone.

And then Jesus says, "I will not leave you orphaned." "The Creator will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. The Spirit of Truth. You know the Spirit because the Spirit abides with you and the Spirit will be in you."

Let me be clear. This is not necessary good news yet. In fact, I'll tell you if I were sitting in the room that night, I would not be so thrilled about this.

Growing up in my Midwest college-town church, we were, on the whole, fairly reserved in our talk about the Holy Spirit – this Spirit of Truth. I think there were only two times when I heard anything about the Holy Spirit: (a) at a baptism, when a child or adult was blessed by the Creator, Redeemer and Holy Spirit; or (b) on Pentecost Sunday when we described the Holy Spirit descending like a dove or showing herself in the flames. That was it.

It's not that we didn't believe in the Holy Spirit. Rather, we were a modest, hard-working people who seemed to get along on our own pretty well. After all, if the Holy Spirit was there, she was in the background working, and out of our sight and our concern, like the way breathing becomes second nature.

There were several neighborhood charismatic churches in Mt. Pleasant. I had a couple of friends in high school who went to one of those churches. They told me stories about their worship – all of that speaking in tongues and being moved to stand and dance. So, it would be the truth to tell you that I was more than a little bit afraid of someday being overtaken by the Holy Spirit and accidentally speaking in tongues.

I read somewhere that "The reason mountain climbers are tied together is to keep the sane ones from going home." Well, we know mountain climbers are tied together to keep from getting lost or going over a cliff. But there's another piece of truth here.

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When things get tough up on the mountain, when fear sets in, you can fully appreciate that a climber is tempted to say, "This is crazy! I'm going home." The life of faith can be like that -- doubts set in, despair overwhelms us, and the whole notion of believing in God seems crazy. Jesus knew his disciples would have days like that.

So, he told them, "look, we're tied together like branches on the vine, like climbers tied to the rope, we are tied together by the Spirit, to trust in One who is always more than we can understand, to keep us moving ahead on the journey of faith, to encourage us when believing seems absurd."

Because you know, when you are hurting, when you are suffering, when you are grieving and when you are angry, believing does indeed seem absurd. You can't see Jesus, after all. How will you know there is a God?

When you read the news that the Antarctic Circle has begun an irrevocable, unstoppable disintegration, you wonder if there is a God. When you read the news of intentional, maddening death and injury with a car is turned into a weapon on a busy city street in New York, you wonder if there is a God.

Sometimes we are convinced that the fact that there is pain and suffering is evidence that there is no God; your loss and your isolation is evidence that Jesus is gone, not here. Yet, God is here and suffering with us. Where is that renewable energy source? From whence does my light come?

When the Spirit comes, everyone is connected; tied to one another. Dependent upon every other person being present and accepted and loved. When the Spirit of Truth comes, we are invited into the community.

As a wire links a power source with a light bulb, as a conduit links a source of water with dry land, as the radar wave links the transmitter to the receiver, as the electromagnetic spectrum links a wireless network to a laptop computer, so the Spirit of Truth links us to God and links us to the presence of Christ in the world.

When I was probably 11 or 12 years old, my family was at the cottage up on Indian River, a scenic, river and woodsy kind of classic northern Michigan setting. My grandfather had built the cottage in the 1930s – it was their family home during the depression when they were rebuilding their lives. And Grandma and Grandpa spent their summers here.

I remember standing outside the house, in the yard overlooking the river. I was helping Grandma do the laundry with one of those old, ringer washing machines. Those machines with a big open tank of water that churns the clothes clean and then squeezes every drop of wetness out of the fabric by running each piece through the tight rubber rolls. We are standing there talking and, like many teenagers I burst into tears for no apparent reason.

Grandma kept putting the next piece of clothes through the ringer so that I would catch it on the other side and hang it on the line. She said, "What is it, Annette?" and I said, "well, we leave tomorrow and I'm going to miss you so much."

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“Oh, Annette, do you not know that we are connected even when we are apart? Every day you look up at the sun, the same sun that I see from wherever I am. Every night you look up at the stars, the same stars that I see from wherever I am.”

The sun and the stars – symbols of this Spirit of connectedness, this Spirit of Truth. This is not just any “link” or any “relationship.” This is the Holy Spirit – the part of the Trinity of God that is not defined by gender, class, sexuality or ethnicity. This is the Holy Spirit, breaking the barriers of sexism, classism, racism and all sorts of prejudices that need to go. That’s our job, too -- to be the link. We are the expression of the relationship in the world. And we are renewed by this resource of God – wherever the sun shines, whenever the stars shine, there is the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Truth.

We are not strangers, but friends; we are not orphans, but children of God; you are not individuals going through this world alone, but linked together as one body.

Over my head, I see trouble in the air.
Over my head, I see trouble in the air.
Over my head, I see trouble in the air.
There must be a God somewhere.

Over my head, I hear music in the air.
Over my head, I hear music in the air.
Over my head, I hear music in the air.
There must be a God somewhere.

Over my head, I see sunshine in the air.
Over my head, I see sunshine in the air.
Over my head, I see sunshine in the air.
There must be a God somewhere.

Amen.