

Final Sunday Season of Creation, September 29, 2024

Gospel Luke 12: 22-34

Contemplation, Action, St. Francis, and the Care of Creation

*“God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit help us to know your Presence within us.
Amen.”*

Father Marshall Craver is a retired Episcopal priest who now does spiritual direction for people including clergy within our diocese. I had a session with him this past Monday. Some of you probably know Marshall. It is because of Marshall’s influence on me more than anything else that years ago I began walking along this path of searching, of trying to understand, of seeing if I could somehow find and know God in all things. He initiated me into the world of contemplative prayer, and that seems to have been the door that once open led me into an awareness of this infinite world of God. It has been and continues to be a fascinating exploration and journey. The idea of contemplative prayer is intimidating to a lot of people, many of whom think it is a deep and mysterious way of praying that only deeply “spiritual” people like monks in a monastery somewhere can do. Well, it is not like that at all. My personal definition for contemplation is that it is anything that gives us a direct experience of what we call God, of what some have called the Ultimate Reality, or perhaps Ultimate Truth. There are lots of forms of contemplative prayer—for instance centering prayer, mantra prayer, lectio divina—and all of them have one function: to open the one who is praying to the truth of who he or she really is, that is a person created by God and within whom God is already present. I would say that Jesus is the archetype—the perfect example or model—of a human being who was completely aware of and in union with the God within him. And just as Jesus came from this ultimate reality that we call God, so all of us were created by that same source. That is who we really are, all of us: every race, every gender, people of every culture, every way of thinking. Yes, that includes everyone on both sides of this ridiculous political divide we are now experiencing—

Democrats and Republicans alike! Over eight billion of us alive right now, and each and every one of us the product of one Creator. What is it Jesus said about us? He said that “it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” This kingdom he is talking about is not something or some place we will finally get to when we leave here, when we die. It is already within us. It is the light and the truth of God already in us, because we are all created from the same source.

But there is a problem! Somewhere along the line, somewhere in our development, somewhere in the experiences of our lives, we forget who we really are. We forget—or perhaps were never told—that our true selves, the truth about each of us, is that the same creator made us out of the same raw material, the same matter and spirit, and that same material is still in there. Call that material whatever you like, but I see it as the spark, the light, the truth, the love of God the Creator. Our forgetfulness of this truth reminds me of the story about a little four year old boy and his newborn sister. Just home from the hospital the baby sister is in the nursery in her crib, and the parents tell the boy that he can go to see her and talk to her. They close the door and listen from the hallway. What they hear him ask her is this, “Tell me what God is like. I think I forgot.” What contemplative prayer—any prayer for that matter—what it does is help us remember a truth that we have somehow forgotten. Life itself, the challenges, demands, busy-ness, disappointments, the sufferings get in the way, and we forget. We forget who we really are. God emptied God’s self into creation in the very beginning, a self-emptying that continues without end, and we are part of that creation into which God pours God out. What we say as Christians—the language we use—is that the Christ is within us. The “I am” is in here. What was it Jesus said about Abraham when he was being harassed by the Jews? He said “Before Abraham was, I am.” That “I am,” the same words God said when Moses asked for a name, is the presence of God within all created things, within each of us.

So how do we cultivate an awareness of that Presence within us? There are lots of ways, including contemplative prayer, including prayer of any type that opens us to the reality of God within us and within all created things. What does it look like for someone to accept the reality of who they really are, and to actually live that way? It is in their actions emanating from the love we find within us. Things like, as Jesus said so well, “I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me a drink, I was homeless and you gave me a room, I was shivering and you gave me clothes, I was sick and you stopped to visit, I was in prison and you came to me.” Or in the condensed version, “Love your neighbor.” Father Richard Rohr, the Franciscan Roman Catholic priest who has written so much about this topic, has a school called the “Center for Action and Contemplation.” Notice the word “action” before the word “contemplation.” It means living—our actions—in a way that reflects our awareness of the presence of God—as Christians we call it the Christ—within us. Jesus calls it living in the Kingdom. With his many parables about the Kingdom of God he is trying to lead us to an understanding about what this type of life might look like. The lives of many people throughout history have shown that it is possible to see life through this lens of love. It means intentionally looking for the sacred in everything we encounter, in both the extraordinary and the mundane. If we can somehow cultivate this mystical gaze then the ordinary world becomes more luminous, filled with light, as Barbara Brown Taylor calls it a luminous web showing forth flashes of beauty and moments of meaning. When we look for the holy, the universe responds by revealing almost everything as holy. A new blossom on your lemon tree, a bowl of cereal with raspberries and milk, your new baby, and also the scary diagnosis and the restless nights. When and how do you start discovering the love and the holiness that is hidden beneath the mundane events in our lives? We start right here in the middle of our often messy lives. Set your intention to see the diamond, the treasure buried in the field you are walking on. Choose to see the face of God in the face of the harried young

woman behind the counter taking orders at MacDonald's, in your moody and recalcitrant teenager, in feeding your cat, in peeling an orange. Open your spiritual heart, and then do everything you can to keep it open. God knows what will happen!

This week is the final week of the Season of Creation which began on September 1st. The season ends on the Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi. St. Francis was aware of this unity between himself and God, and his life—his actions—were a reflection of who he really was. Born in the early 12th century in Italy, he was the founder of the Franciscan order of Friars and the women's Order of St. Clare. Probably no one in history has set out as seriously as did Francis to imitate the life of Christ and to carry out so literally Christ's work. He renounced all worldly goods and his family ties, and embraced a life of poverty and solidarity with and care for the poor. He is also known for his care of animals and of all created things. He considered all nature as the mirror of God. He called all creatures his "brothers" and "sisters," and became the patron saint of pets and animals. In 1979 Pope John Paul II recognized Francis as the patron saint of ecology. Francis took seriously Jesus' words in today's gospel, "Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys." It reminds me of something Marshall Craver said this past Monday. He said that when we remember who we really are, the "I am" within us, the Christ that lives within us, then there is nothing that can ever take that away. We are safe. We have found our true home. We are living in the Kingdom. As Jesus said, "do not worry about your life..." and then he reminds us of others in creation that God cares for, ravens and birds and the lilies..."Do not keep worrying," he says..."instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well." The cat-loving childless woman (*pause*) St. Julian of Norwich was a theologian in 14th century England. Despite the serious illness and suffering she endured, she maintained an optimistic hopeful outlook on life.

She is remembered for her famous quote “All will be well, and all manner of things will be well.” She remembered who she truly was. Nothing could take that away.

The Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi is this Friday, October 4th, the final day of the Season of Creation of the church, and today is the final Sunday of the season, as our liturgy today reflects. St. Francis is a model for how cultivating our union with the divine can guide us into the environmental crisis we now face. His care for animals and for all creation stemmed from his knowing that we are united with all created things, and that in caring for them we are expressing God’s love. Caring for creation is a spiritual matter and a moral imperative. The Season of Creation ends Friday, but our calling does not. We will have an outdoor celebration of St. Francis and of the ending of the Season of Creation in the garden here next Sunday October 6th at 6:00 in the evening. Come join us as we celebrate St. Francis and this beautiful creation of which we are all a part.

Rev. Bob Donnell