

All That Is, Is Holy
Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson
April 19, 2015

I want to begin with a reading from *To Re-Enchant the World* by Richard Grigg

“That which cannot be seen shows itself.”

What Grigg is talking about here is revelation.

Revelation is our theme of the month,
and when we are talking about how the sacred shows
itself,

we are talking about revelation.

And as he says, we Unitarian Universalists have traveled
the long-way round
to our sacramental principal.

How many of you were raised Catholic?

Catholics have seven official sacraments.

Visible signs of the holy in the world,
the moments where the holy, where God, is most
present.

See if you can remember them all with me:

baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, anointing of
the sick, marriage, and ordination or holy orders.

The protestants came along and said, that’s too many.

There are only two.

Baptism and Communion.

These are the times, they said, when God's love and presence is truly visible.

"Signs and seals of the covenant of grace."

A phrase you might recognize is you were raised, say, Presbyterian or Lutheran or the like.

And we Unitarian Universalists come out of the Protestant tradition.

So for a long time, we had these two sacraments as well.

And then something happened.

Baptism stopped being required, and communion was served less and less.

We didn't think that God's grace showed up in those rituals,

they were, for us, just reminders of an old story.

At best.

So we went all the way down to zero.

No sacraments.

This was 50, 60, 70 years ago.

And in the last 30 or so, something else happened.

Something very much in line with our transcendentalist spiritual ancestors,

who said that each person, each moment, has a direct connection to the holy.

Something happened that was both authentic to who we had been and revolutionary.

We decided that everything was a sacrament.

Everything.

Not seven. Not two. Not zero.

Infinity.

That the holy - call it life, spirit, universe, love, god,
wonder, Tao, mystery, the unnamed -
the holy was visible everywhere, in every moment.

Through our own reason, nature, arts, acts of social
justice, as Grigg says.

Through the eyes and touch and voice of one another.

In the stars and the sea.

In pain and suffering, and compassion therefore.

In love and peace.

Everywhere.

So it isn't a coincidence that over the last thirty years,
as this new universal, imminent sacramentality has
become our new theology,
that we've fallen in love, as a religious movement, with
the poetry of Mary Oliver.

She is the bard of imminence, of how the holy is in this
moment and place.

Especially when it comes to the natural world.

One of the best examples in my mind is our second
reading today, entitled Morning Poem.

Mary Oliver, Morning Poem

Every morning
the world
is created.

Under the orange

sticks of the sun
the heaped
ashes of the night
turn into leaves again

and fasten themselves to the high branches ---
and the ponds appear
like black cloth
on which are painted islands

of summer lilies.
If it is your nature
to be happy
you will swim away along the soft trails

for hours, your imagination
alighting everywhere.
And if your spirit
carries within it

the thorn
that is heavier than lead ---

if it's all you can do
to keep on trudging ---

there is still
somewhere deep within you
a beast shouting that the earth
is exactly what it wanted ---

each pond with its blazing lilies
is a prayer heard and answered
lavishly,
every morning,

whether or not
you have ever dared to be happy,
whether or not
you have ever dared to pray.

Each pond with its blazing lilies
is a prayer heard and answered.
Nature is such a place of imminence and transcendence -
all at once to feel part of something and yet feel that
beyond.
The way everything that is, is alive and beautiful and
sacred
if we have but eyes to see and ears to hear.

No wonder we have fallen in love with Mary Oliver's
poetry.

And with similar poetry and prose: Wendell Berry, Aldo Leopold, Denise Levertov.

Carolyn's own poem is in that same tradition: to notice the very particular flowers, colors, places, people, waters, and celebrate them as wondrous and magical.

We have also discovered, of course, all these great traditions of incarnational sacredness within other world religions of this kind of connected mysticism.

The Christian mystics who write of God in every blade of grass

and who sang of how they heard music in the air, there must be a God somewhere.

The Indigenous and Pagan traditions, where the holy really does live in the natural world - which includes us.

Who celebrate the rhythms of nature to remind us that we too live in that cycle and not apart from it.

The Buddhist tradition that sees separateness as illusion, how a piece of paper contains the sun and the wind and the log and the soil and the stars.

And the Sufi tradition of Islam, a tradition that celebrates the oneness of creation, the closeness of divinity, the way everything that is, is connected.

Elizabeth Alexander, a Unitarian Universalist composer,

has set to music an adaption of a poem by the great Sufi mystic Kabir.

The words:

Song of Kabir, Elizabeth Alexander

You are in us, and we are in You,

Each being distinct, yet ever united.

You are the tree, the seed, and the cell;

You are the flower, the fruit, and the shade; You are the sun, the light, and the lighted;

You are the manifold form of infinite space; You are the breath, the word, and the meaning; You are the limit and the limitless.

You are the Immanent Mind in us;

You are the Supreme Soul within the soul. Blessed are all who see You.

Like I said, this is both within who we have been and it is revolutionary all at once.

It was 1874 when Samuel Longfellow, Unitarian poet and author of many of our hymns of that era, wrote praises to Life that maketh all things new, the wide horizon's grander view.

He was following that transcendentalist view of a generation before,

that the holy really was present everywhere - nature, yes, but that nature includes us, too.

Daughter, what are the three biggest consumers of apples in North America?

I always say, people,

- wild turkey, white-tailed deer, brown bear.

Wild animals, she says.

Oh, but dear, we can be wild, too.

This includes us - the natural, sacred, interconnected world -

we are not apart from it but part of it.

We ourselves are a sacrament, a visible sign of the holy.

And so is the furthest star and the closest grain of sand.

Wonder, life, power, the universe, it is all connected.

It is no coincidence that over this last generation, as we have embraced this incarnational sacredness, it has been not in spite of the insights of science, but in concert with them.

For we remain, mystical as we might be sometimes, devoted to the scientific understanding of the world we share.

But here science has led the way.

Oh, they don't always call it holy - that's an adjective we can apply, or not, as we choose.

But science clearly tells us the same truths the mystics have sung for thousands of years:

that we are made of the stars;

that everything is one, connected and interdependent;

that the story of the universe includes everything,
includes us;
that we are the big bang looking back on itself;
that the universe might actually sing, make music with
subatomic vibrations;
that every person is our kin, part of one family;
that every form of life we know is, in fact, related,
all part of one earth-family;
that we depend on this life in ways we only are beginning
to understand;
that sacred spirals make up cells and animals and stars;
that music and community and love are good for the
body;
that the mind and the body and the soul are not distinct,
but one thing,
and go beyond the walls of our skin to connect with the
wider world.
All these are now generally accepted scientific principles,
put in slightly more poetic language.

In affirming a commitment to incarnational sacredness, to
universal sacramentality,
we need not go beyond the dictates of reason and
science,
we need only to add a little mystery to the broth.
The basic ingredients are all there:
cosmology, evolution, quantum mechanics, neurobiology,
ecology.

We hold to a religion which does not contradict these principles,
but embraces them.

To say, in such a scientific universe, that everything that is, was, and will be,
every now and every where and every thing
is an occasion of incarnation,
is to affirm that the quality of sacredness is unbound, is generous,
flows in and between all things.
Not a separateness, but a unity.
Not an exception, but a universal.

This is, then, an enchanted world:
a world full of wonder and magic -
not tricks of the magician, or supernatural interventions,
that's not necessary, anyway, for us too call this world sacred -
to say that all that is, is holy,
it takes only open eyes, open hearts, and open minds.

So what?

I mean, that's nice and all, Matthew.
About how the world is sacred and all that.
Makes us feel good, I suppose, but really, so what?

There are, I suppose, two responses to the realization,
the mystical insight, that all that is, is sacred.

One can feel a sense of private gratitude:
to just go out into the woods and breathe in and retreat
from the day-to-day realities of the world.

The monk.

The hermit.

Spirit filled, and living as much as possible in harmony
with this flowing beauty.

And there are days we should all do that, I think:
when despair for the world grows in you,
go down where the wood drake rests on the water,
to the peace of wild things,
who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.

That is the first so what, then:

take time, every day, to just be in the beauty of the
earth.

Play outside.

Stare out the window, even.

Listen to beautiful music.

Read a great book.

Go down to the water and just breathe.

This renews, restores, and rebalances.

It reminds you, I hope, that you are part of this
wonderful world,
it is good for your heart - both metaphorical and literal,
your love and the pumping of the blood in your body.

But the second response to this mystical realization is
also important:

that is to look into the world
see the beauty and the wonder,
but don't close your eyes to the trouble and the pain.
And from your sense that all is one - unity -
and that all is connected - universality -
that you are part of it all - interdependence -
from this,
to love the world, yourself, each other, life.
To love it so much that you help nudge your corner of the
world toward
more justice and beauty.

I was running yesterday morning - such a beautiful warm
day -
along the Rock River, the sun shining on the water, the
grass green,
the people in all their colors and shapes and groups
walking and running and biking along beside me,
the geese and the ducks and the flowers,
the children and the elders,
and thinking about the mystical beautiful world,
and running along behind the library, past those whose
home
is that park bench,
down past abandoned factories,
chemicals still steeping into the earth.
I thought of that phrase from the poet:
you must love this mutilated world,
and then I heard on my running playlist

those lyrics from John Lennon:

Better get yourself together darlin'

Join the human race

Who in the hell d'you think you are

A super star

Well, right you are

Well we all shine on

Like the moon and the stars and the sun

Well we all shine on

Ev'ryone come on

We all shine on.

We are stars, the dust of stars, anyway, and return to them.

And so is the man on the bench

and so are the chemicals and the soil and the water.

All stars.

All connected.

All sacred.

So how then shall you live?

If all that is, is holy, including you,
how will you live?

How will you treat your body?

How will you treat each other?

How will you treat the earth?

What choices will you make to live more in harmony with the flowing sacred energy of life?

If you are an incarnation of God, spirit, love, Tao, call it whatever,

if you are an incarnation of the holy -

and you are — you are —

then your life matters to the holy.

It matters as much as everybody else,

it matters.

Indeed, you are loved by the holy,

and the holy is you,

and so those old words:

to love the holy and to love your neighbor as yourself:

well, they amount to the same instruction.

Because the holy, and you, and your neighbor are the same,

all part of one woven fabric of beauty,

all part of one flowing stream,

all part of one dance, one song.

And by neighbor, I mean, well, everything.

Everything.

One last thing.

Maybe some of you are a little skeptical.

All this mysticism and such.

You're not sure that everything that is, is an incarnation of anything,

let alone the holy.

That's OK.

But I'll issue to you this invitation:

live as if it was.

live as if the good news I've shared today -

that you are sacred and so is everything and its all
connected -

live as if it's true.

Because I assure you that life is sweeter, and more just,
and more beautiful,

and more full of joy and compassion and hope,
when you do.

So let us praise the beauty of the earth and life and the
days we are given,

let us praise the wonder of existence

and let us live in such a way that we will affirm and prove

that all that is, is holy,

that all is one,

that life is wonder,

and that love is true.

And let us sing.