

The Metanoia That Leads to Life

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

May 15, 2022 Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 11:1-18; Revelation 21:1-7; John 13:34-35

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Fifth Sunday of Easter. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online.

The movie *Field of Dreams* said, “If you build it, he will come.” It became a catch-phrase because it’s true: preparing for a dream to become real often opens a way for it to happen.

That is what we are doing here. We are preparing our heart, mind, soul and body to receive what we dream that God or Christ or the Holy Spirit may give us—greater peace or joy or love, the courage and strength to endure, the wisdom to know what to do or say, and greater dreams we have for ourselves, our children and our world.

If we build a ballfield in the cornfield of our heart, as in the movie, then “our father who art in heaven” will come play ball with us.

Or if we build a church where we prepare for God’s realm on earth by practicing living by its laws of love, then the realm of God will come to this corner of the earth.

That is our dream, anyway, and we can fulfill it today by extending our loving care and support to one another after the service, both in person and on Zoom.

Call to Worship: Lent was the season of wilderness and the shadow of death. Now Eastertide focuses on the light of life rising from death, and the Promised Land, the earth of our dreams.

The Spirit gives the human heart visions of the ideal life, and it helps us know what we have to do in order to make the dream come true. People have longed for thousands of years for a world without war, and a society ruled by the laws of love and compassion, justice and mercy. We have not always succeeded, but the most spiritually mature have seen the true oneness of everyone and everything, and who knows how many wars and how much injustice that vision has prevented?

Today our visionaries see that we can live sustainably and harmoniously as one, and they are refining tools and systems to create that new earth.

We know the ideal, and we also know the path that could enable us to fulfill it. As the visionary Gus Speth, puts it, “The transitions required can be achieved only in the context of what I will call the rise of a new consciousness.” Gus calls for “a spiritual awakening—a transformation of the human heart.”

Let us worship together seeking the path that leads to the transformation of our heart and transformation of the world...

Children’s Time: We just heard the book of Revelation in the Bible talk about a beautiful dream or vision a man named John had on the island of Patmos in the Mediterranean Sea. He saw the earth made like new, a place where there will be no more pain, no crying, where people will live knowing that God is right here with us.

It has a funny line in it that says that those who conquer will experience this new world. The old King James Bible says “those who overcometh,” as in the song, “We Shall Overcome,” which is what the Civil Rights movement sang when they marched to conquer hatred and unfairness and violence.

Martin Luther King Jr. was not the only one who had that dream, a huge number of people did, including the children of Birmingham, Alabama, who ran out of school to march for freedom and peace, and when teachers locked the doors, the children climbed out windows.

They knew they would get in trouble, they knew the police had biting dogs and jails waiting for them, so before they could overcome others’ racism they had to be able to overcome their own selfishness and self-concern. They had to be willing to lay down their life for love, as Jesus put it.

Today Greta Thunberg and millions of other children have overcome their self-concern in order to try to get adults to stop climate change. Earlier I quoted Gus Speth, and here’s another: “The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy, and to deal with these we need a spiritual and cultural transformation.” Spiritual transformation are two big words, but what they means is pretty simple. We grow into the ability to turn from thinking about ourselves to thinking instead of other people and the earth and God, and we decide to do what would be best for them.

This is hard to do, but if we overcome our reluctance, we find ourselves walking on a new and better earth. There is something that can help us overcome selfishness and find what the Spirit wants us to do... Pray! Let us pray the prayer Jesus taught us...

Sermon: The Metanoia That Leads to Life

“Where there is no vision, the people perish,” the proverb says (KJV Proverbs 29:18). Visions and dreams play a life-giving role in the Bible. They are gifts from God that flow continuously from the Garden of Eden in Genesis to the new heaven and earth in Revelation. Dreams of yearning are answered by dreams of instruction. We dream of more perfect love, of serenity in the midst of struggle, of a way through the suffering we face, and the Spirit offers us visions of how to fulfill those yearnings.

God has a dream, too, that all the earth will one day live in peace, that all the poor and hurting will receive mercy, that all creation will return to the harmony of Eden.

Jesus had a dream. He envisioned a world living by the law of love. He gave his followers the new commandment that they should love one another in the same way that he loved them, a love willing to lay down its life, and not just for family or closest friends, but even for strangers, even for neighbors we disagree with, even for enemies.

The book of Acts shows that Christ’s followers had to change in order to obey this commandment fully. Their hearts and minds were stuck in an old dream, an immature, unenlightened dream that is more like a nightmare—the dream of being chosen over others. The disciples had been taught by their mainstream culture and religion that some people deserve to be excluded.

Peter told them about his dream and the strangers and enemies who came to him who had been instructed in their own dream to listen to his message. Peter realized that the meaning of these dreams was that “God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34), that God wants all to be included. When the Jerusalem church heard this, they finally accepted how wide their love had to be to match the love of Christ.

The story in Acts ends with a strange statement. The people in the Jerusalem church say, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” What is strange

about this is that there was no talk of repentance in Peter's recounting of what happened. There was no confession of sin, no hint of guilt or shame about their past or present condition.

This is a problem of translation. The original Greek word is *metanoia*, which means literally a change of heart and mind moving beyond to a new level. It means a transformation of consciousness in the direction of the heart and mind of Christ and the ability to see oneness with all people and the earth.

That reading makes more sense because this whole passage is about changing hearts and minds. Peter's dream changed his, the Gentiles' dream changed theirs, and Peter's story about the dreams changed the Jerusalem church's heart and mind, and changed history.

God offers to open our heart and mind to the Holy Spirit's vision, and to change our old feelings and thoughts that have restricted our love, replacing them with the unconditional wideness of Christ's love.

The Spirit offers us the gift of *metanoia* that leads to life so that we will use the gift to fulfill God's dream for the earth. The Spirit of life wants to transform us and guide and empower us to transform the world.

If we have the *metanoia* that leads to life, then we will see ways ahead and solutions that other people do not see.

Michael Nagler's book, *The Search for a Nonviolent Future*, tells a story about Nagler's spiritual teacher, Eknath Easwaran. One day Easwaran and a friend were walking through a village bazaar in India. They came upon a villager with a caged bear. The cage was so tight that the bear could hardly turn around.

Easwaran and his friend saw the suffering in the bear's eyes. They did not speak about it, but later in the day Easwaran went to call on his friend and found him trembling with rage. His friend burst out, "I'm going to take my gun to the bazaar. I'm going to set that bear free and shoot anyone who tries to stop me."

Easwaran stalled him, saying, "Wait...let me see what I can do."

He went to the owner of the bear to try to reason with him. He learned that the man did not want to have such a small cage—he just couldn't afford a bigger one. So Easwaran went off to the village carpenter. He explained the situation and convinced him to give him a good deal on a cage.

Then he went back to his friend and said, “Suppose we could get a better cage built for a reasonable price, and the owner agreed to use it, would you put up the money?” His friend said, “Gladly, but the owner will never agree.”

Easwaran said, “He already has.” (p 60f)

Michael Nagler points out that Easwaran was just as angry as his friend. He felt just as strongly that the bear must be helped. I don’t know why he could not buy the bear and free it, I’m sure he would have if he could, but his friend was so caught up in his anger that the only solution he could see was violence.

Metanoia enabled Easwaran to extend love to the man who was causing his rage, as well as to the bear who needed his help. It led to a creative solution that no one else could see.

The world today needs people to undergo metanoia in order to solve its life-threatening crises, so it is important that we understand two things.

The first is that metanoia is not a permanent state. The brilliant Jungian psychiatrist and Christian mystic, Maurice Nicholl, said, “As one’s level of being increases, receptivity to higher meaning increases. As one’s being decreases, the old meanings return.”

Metanoia is a product of practice. We need to keep on the path to increase our spiritual level in order to keep seeing with the heart and mind of Christ.

The second thing that is crucial to understand is that metanoia is the second of four steps on the path. One step flows naturally into the next, and we repeat these ideally many times a day in small ways, and steadily increase their depth over a lifetime. This is a path for individuals and for communities and for humanity as a whole. Here again are the steps. The path begins with

- *Kenosis*: Self-emptying, letting go of the ego’s attachments, making room for the Spirit to fill us and lead us toward...
- *Metanoia*: Transformation of consciousness in the direction of having the heart and mind of Christ, an expanding perspective of oneness that results in...
- *Agape*: compassionate, unconditional love for all, because loving actions are what the Spirit flowing through the heart and mind of Christ in us wants to do; and the direct result is
- *Koinonia*: the realm of God forming around us as we do acts of love and justice, preserving, creating or restoring community, so earth may live as one...

We know the dream of God because it is the dream of the Spirit within our hearts. We know the life we long to see on earth, and we know the spiritual path that leads to that life. We

know that the metanoia that leads to life is a result of daily, moment to moment practice along this path. We know the earth desperately needs this.

What, then, shall we do?

Let us start by praying together in self-emptying silence, wordlessly opening to the Spirit...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

Standing in the shade
of a tree trunk a May day
ninety-one degrees.