

*An Urgent Call to the Way of the Heart*

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*November 6, 2022, Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost*

*Selected verses on the heart, and Luke 21:5-12, 28*

**Welcome:** Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online, and welcome especially to the VTones and pianist Da-Shih Hu. Thank you for being here!

My father used to call on Sunday afternoons to hear about the service, always asking, “Did you talk about love?” It felt uncharacteristic because his way of showing affection was with a joke or a jab, he made fun of sentimentality, he never said “I love you,” but he looked at a world that increasingly distressed him with its injustice and environmental degradation and knew that Christ-like love was our only hope—love of our neighbor as our self, meaning everyone and every creature on earth.

He was right, every Sunday needs to be about love, most importantly to practice it and live it, because everything else that happens here arises out of that. So please be sure that everyone feels included in this loving community today, both in person and on Zoom, extending your care and support especially to those you do not know and those you know are struggling.

**Call to Worship:** A couple I knew fell out of the habit of church as their children got older, but they returned a few years later. I asked them why they came back and they said they missed the structure of the church year. I’m not sure many would give that reason, but it’s a really good one.

The flow of seasons in the church embodies the wisdom of the spiritual path. Right now we are drawing near the end of the Season of Pentecost, which begins at planting time and ends at harvest time, the season of watching the Spirit of life on earth do its miraculous work and watching the Spirit work through the teachings and life of Jesus.

The church year ends with our Thanksgiving service on November 20<sup>th</sup> and the new year begins on the first Sunday of Advent, November 27<sup>th</sup>, so we are near the end of Jesus’ life in our gospel readings. The passage today talks about the possibility of an end time if humanity does

not change its ways, and yet over and over Pentecost season reminds us that we *can* change, that we can return to the sacred way, that there is hope in the way of the heart.

Pentecost is about the last steps on the path, the incarnation of love and creation of beloved community, of God's realm on earth. The first step in every religious tradition to get on that path is to quiet our minds and open our hearts to the Spirit, which is what the season of Advent will be all about as we start the new year. Let us practice opening now as we worship together...

**Children's Time:** Today we are thinking of some things that come to an end and some that never end. It's like the season of fall, when the trees lose their leaves—the leaves end, but the tree lives on and drops seeds with the Spirit of new life in them in the hope that even if the tree dies, the forest will never end.

In C. S. Lewis's Narnia book, *The Last Battle*, at one point a whole world is ending, and a huge door opens up, big enough for all the people and creatures of that world to pass through. Aslan the good and holy lion stands in the doorway to greet them, radiant with divine light.

C. S. Lewis describes what happens saying, "The creatures came rushing on, their eyes brighter and brighter as they drew nearer and nearer... But as they came right up to Aslan one or other of two things happened to each of them. They all looked straight in his face, I don't think they had any choice about that. And when some looked, the expression of their faces changed terribly—it was fear and hatred... And all the creatures who looked at Aslan in that way swerved...and disappeared into his huge...shadow.... I don't know what became of them.

"But the others looked in the face of Aslan and loved him, though some of them were very frightened at the same time. And all these came in at the Door." Lewis says that some who loved Aslan and came through the door were the last people you would expect, people who had done not-so-good things in life, who had even rejected and attacked Aslan, but in their heart, when they saw the light, they loved it and chose it, and found themselves in a whole new fresh world on a beautiful spring day.

The thing that I love about that story is that love that makes all the difference. It is our hearts in the end that determine who we are and that lead us into new life when an old life ends. Whether we face a big change or a small one, it helps if we open our hearts to the light of goodness and love.

There is something we can do to open that way... Pray! Let us pray the Lord's Prayer...

## ***An Urgent Call to the Way of the Heart***

Mainstream and progressive Christians tend to roll their eyes at apocalyptic passages like the one we just heard because of the fervent predictions of the rapture and end of the world that it sets off in other Christians. But such passages are important to the context of Jesus' teachings, and help explain why he felt so much urgency that he was willing to lay down his life.

The apocalyptic chapters come at the end of the gospels, but there is something at the beginning of the gospels that we need to put together with them.

Jesus first comes into view as an adult as a follower of John the Baptist. John's slogan was, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." The word repent means seeking forgiveness and resolving to change, but in the Greek New Testament the word translated as repentance is metanoia which means much more than repent. It means that our heart, mind and spirit move beyond where they are now, a transformation of consciousness giving an expanded perspective of oneness and capacity for unconditional compassion and love. Metanoia is what the 51<sup>st</sup> Psalm is praying for when it says "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put in me a new and right spirit." Metanoia's goal is the purity of heart that Jesus said would see God.

Metanoia was the first part of the slogan, and the second was that the kingdom of God was at hand, a realm founded on the oneness and unconditional love that metanoia brings. The followers of John could see the injustice and violence and inevitable destructive consequences of the kingdoms of Herod and Caesar. They pledged allegiance to God's realm and refused to bow to the empires of selfish ego and oppressive power and wealth.

As a result, John the Baptist was arrested and executed by Herod because he feared John's popular movement as subversive and revolutionary. Jesus immediately took up the slogan and began to teach and organize his own stream of the movement, knowing he risked the same fate as John.

Today's apocalyptic passage helps us understand why these spiritual masters were so passionate about the material world that they were willing to die for it. They could see the consequences of the path humanity was on, they saw that the beautiful and good things humanity had created were in danger of being destroyed by humanity's own worst self. They saw that terrible suffering would come as a result of following the path of selfishness, they saw that wars and environmental devastation would come. They saw that those who followed the sacred way,

the way of the heart, the way of the Spirit, would be seen as enemies by the oppressors and would be persecuted, arrested and killed. But they saw that the crisis would bring opportunity as well as danger, and that in the very moment when all seems lost, redemption can come, if we stay faithful to the spiritual path.

That is what today's apocalyptic passage is saying, and it does not make me roll my eyes. It makes me open them wide in recognition that the urgency of Jesus and the ancient prophets is *our* urgency. So it is crucial that we look at the path that the prophets and Jesus saw as the one great hope we have.

The Prophet Haggai said, "Take courage...all you people of the land, says the Lord. Work, for I am with you.... My spirit abides among you. Do not fear." (2:3-5)

The Prophet Isaiah said, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength." (30:15)

The Prophet Jeremiah said, "When you search for me you will find me if you seek with all your heart," and, "I will put my law within you, and I will write it on your hearts."

The Prophet Ezekiel said, "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you."

Today the threat of humanity's destruction is far greater than what those prophets faced, and yet we are so blessed to live at a time when spiritual and psychological understanding have taken evolutionary leaps to help us make the personal and social transformations that humanity needs in order to avoid ultimate destruction.

Mahatma Gandhi gave a succinct description of the way of the heart that Jesus and the Christian tradition have laid out. Gandhi said, "There comes a time when an individual becomes irresistible and their action becomes all-pervasive in its effect. This comes when they reduce themselves to zero."

Most people who grew up in the Christian church never heard of a path that would lead to zero. Thomas Keating talked about young people knocking on the door of his Trappist monastery in western Massachusetts in the late 1970s thinking it was the Buddhist Insight Meditation Center, located in a former monastery down the road. Many of those knocking had grown up Christian, and the Trappists asked them why they were exploring Buddhism. They said they were seeking a spiritual path.

The Trappists were confused because they thought Christianity offered a spiritual path, but they realized that it was not being taught that way. As the urgency of the prophets turned to the complacency of the establishment church, the way of the heart, the path of personal and social transformation, had dropped out of sight.

The monks went back to the classic contemplative teaching in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century book *The Cloud of Unknowing* and combined it with modern spiritual, psychological and scientific insights and created what we now know as Centering Prayer. Over the past forty years it has sparked the greatest surge of contemplative spirituality in Christian history.

Centering Prayer is a practice of becoming zero by learning to let go of thoughts one at a time and return to our deepest heart's core where the Spirit dwells within us. This self-emptying, called kenosis, allows metanoia to happen with its growing capacity to see oneness and have unconditional, universal compassion and love. Our Heartfulness Contemplative Training circle teaches and practices Centering Prayer, and if you are interested in learning more about it, please let me know.

Centering Prayer takes the first step on the four-step spiritual path. The traditional Greek names for the steps are kenosis, metanoia, agape and koinonia. I will finish the sermon by reading the short descriptions of each step that you can find printed in the bulletin under "Sharing of Joys, Concerns, Prayer Requests and Reflections."

Each of the four steps flows naturally into the next. Ideally, we repeat these steps many times a day in small ways, and deepen in them over a lifetime. This is a path for individuals and for communities and for humanity as a whole, a path that leads to sustainable and harmonious life.

Keep in mind that this is the way of the heart that leads out of the destruction that the prophets saw coming. It improves every moment's situation, and ultimately can save the world. It 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 heart-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's beloved community forming around us as we do acts of love and justice, preserving, creating or restoring community, so earth may live as one and at peace...

Let us pray in silence, allowing the Spirit to move us with its urgent need that we follow this path...

**Haiku by Mel Goertz:**

The trees were full of apples.

I felt love

as I hugged the Duchess tree.