

Northbrae Community Church
February 16, 2020.
10:30 am Service

Sermon: What Direction Comes Grace

There is an old story: A man went into a forest to trap a bird. He was hungry, and the bird was food. There were so many birds in the forest. And the man was so hungry. But birds are skittish, and they are hard to catch because of it. Birds fly off when they hear, or even when they imagine, movement in the space around them.

After catching a bird once or twice, and after missing a bird many more times than that, the hunter put his mind to work and devised a trap. He would leave some seed on the ground where the birds could see it, bring them out into the open, bring them out where the hunter could see them. But hard experience taught the hunter that seed was not enough. So he set up a net in the tree above, and put a thin hidden strand of trip wire under the seed, and when a bird dropped down to the seed: slip, trip, trap! The net came down and caught the bird. Gravity became the hunter's tool.

The hunter had an easy time of it after that. He could go and capture a bird in his hands, snap its neck, and have plenty to eat. He had almost all the birds he wanted. Almost.

But the birds, they hated that trap. They saw their friends, their family caught in the hunter's trap, and know that they would lose their lives to the hunter. But how, the sparrows thought, how, the bobbing quail thought, how the thrush thought, how could they get away from that fiendish trap?

Raven saw from far above, kite saw from farther up, redtail saw from ever farther up. We'll never make it on our own, Raven said. She called the birds together and said, if we're going to make it, we have to work together.

When the hunter came back into the forest and set his trap from the limbs of an old oak tree, the birds got ready. And don't you know it was a baby quail that skittered out into the clearing where the seed was scattered and his little foot tripped the wire and down came the net. Mother quail screeched in horror, and birds came flying down around the baby quail, each one catching a thread of the net in their feet, and one two three lifting the net up off the ground and they flew away. At one signal they each dart off in a different direction, tearing the net apart with their flight. Then they drop the shreds into the open trail where all the animals could see it. The baby quail ran back to his family. The birds of all kinds resumed their watch on the wind or the limbs of trees. And the hunter, he walked away empty handed that day.

I've been thinking of this story lately as Roy and I have been out on the trails around Tilden, listening to the astonishing brocade of birdsong to be heard there. To be heard all around town, if you turn your attention to it. This story counts as what is called a wisdom story:

generally—and there is always variation—a wisdom story relies on a creature or a character who has been around a lot. Has lived a long time and learned.

Now here, of course the hunter has been around a long time, lived long enough to know how to tie a rope into a net, how to set a trap, where the birds can be found. He knows that nearly every bird there is becomes hungry enough to drop from the branches to the ground when seed is set out.

But in stories like this, the birds are wise too. Wiser, perhaps. Wiser because they learned the hard way. The birds watch their companions get caught, they watch their companions die. They know what they are up against when a man gets hungry. In this story the wisdom calls the birds to act together. Wisdom becomes their collective action.

Where does it work like that? I mean, really, where does it work that a group of creatures lift up and break up what binds one of them, a few of them? That is, isn't it? The heart of the story, the answered prayer of the story. To liberate each other. The way I want to tell it, even the hunter stands in awe at the birds' liberation. Even the hunter says: What is this? If the birds can do this for each other, if they can act this way together, I will go off and sin no more.

Between now and Easter, I want to spend a little time looking more closely at some of the ways of being that make up Christianity. Hmm. Or maybe, ways of being up a Christian. One who follows the teachings of the Christ. We are not yet officially entered Lent, that watchful time of year. Fat Tuesday is on February 25, and Lent begins on Wednesday the 26th. So we're ahead of the game right now. We're early birds. But let's jump right into it. This is a good time to reflect on how we want to be in the world.

Every religion comes into being as part of a community. Teachers gather students around them; parents raise their children amongst cousins and friends; feast days and festival days and days of fasting are human inventions, and thus part and parcel of human communities.

If you had to choose one aspect that is the most Christian of Christianity, I would say it is the Beloved Community. That is at the core of everything else that Jesus the Christ taught during his time on earth. And it is the one thing that is hardest to bring about.

While most communities have boundaries: kinship, tribe, neighborhood, denomination, The Beloved Community has no bounds. It doesn't matter, Jesus taught, where you came from or who you came from. You, you yourself, are at the center of God's community. Each of you. Each of us. Each of them. All the them of the world.

One of the things I love about the Way Jesus taught, is that he pointed at what we took for granted, held it up and then turned it upside down or inside out, and rather than reduce it, he expanded how we might understand what is possible in our world.

You know the Golden Rule, and here at Northbrae we know that there are variations of it in most every religion and culture. Just a couple of weeks ago, Akeeah Swan sent me an Instagram post that shows in gorgeous calligraphy and image the Golden Rule from a number of different religions' sacred texts.

In Buddhism : Do not offend others as you would not want to be offended.

Confucianism: Is there any rule that one should follow all of one's life? Yes, the rule of gentle goodness. That which we do not wish to be done to us, we do not do to others.

Judaism: That which you do not wish for yourself, you should not wish for your neighbor.

Jesus, the gentle trickster, turns the idea upside out. Rather than a rule of omission—what you should not do—he nudges us towards an ambition: Do for others that which you would like them to do for you. Make the first move. Offer your hand in friendship. Reach across the edges of your own ideas of family and neighbor. Smile at the stranger. Break apart the fetters from your neighbor's life. Do something that changes the world—even for one small moment of it—for the better.

If all of us can do this, even for a portion of each day, we inch closer to the Beloved Community, or, in another phrasing, God's Kingdom on earth.

Contrary to what many of us are taught about the Kingdom, it's not a Kingdom to come, right? It's not a vision of afterlife. Instead, it's an audacious ambition for this world and this time and it is up to us each to bring it about.

One of my friends from San Francisco Theological, Larry Foy, sums it up this way, "It's not the Kingdom unless we all make it." I love the double verb in this. It's not the Kingdom unless we all make it there: we all need to be there, every one of us; no one left out. And—no less essential—It's not the Kingdom unless we all make it. Create it. Have a hand in making it manifest.

Larry is a black preacher from a black UCC Church in Los Angeles. I always felt he kept us real, kept us focused on the here and now—the here and how—of being a community. I deeply admire him. And I admire the black churches here in America. I feel that those of us in predominantly white congregations have so much to learn from the work and understanding of black churches.

There are many reasons the communities in black churches are so wise. Most of those reasons I do not feel qualified to speak about—but I see the wisdom and it teaches me. And not all black churches are the same; of course not. Like all human endeavors, they reflect the people within them. And all of we people have our ways, and we meet and grow together within and because of our intimate communities.

But black churches in America have grown in ways others have not because of what people in those communities had long endured outside the chapel doors. In an essay on the role of black churches in the American Civil Rights Movement in the latter part of the last century, Allison Calhoun-Brown writes:

Black religious culture provided such a strong collective action frame because the black church had been a “free space” in the black community for centuries. As a free space, the church offered an “environment in which people [were] able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills and values of cooperation and civic virtue.” This was particularly vital in a thoroughly racist society that tried to deny blacks all of these things. It was the church, and not simply black Christianity, that helped to shape these attitudes.¹

It’s not the Kingdom unless we all make it, Larry told us all. Members of black churches know what it is like to be left out of a vision—oh, not just a vision, but the fact of a just society. How long have there been barriers from equality? How much longer now? How long until we all make it manifest for all?

In 2015, a white man walked into a prayer meeting at the Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and after spending time with the people attending, most of them black, the man shot and killed nine of them. Years earlier while on the campaign trail, Barak Obama had befriended the pastor of that church, Honorable Reverend Clementa Pickney. Before the grieving in the church, and across America after the massacre, Obama delivered the eulogy at Reverend Pickney’s funeral. Obama was too often called to be what the media termed the “Consoler in Chief.” And yes, he consoled the mourners, all of us listening. But he was a black man in America, familiar with the nation’s history. He was and is familiar with black churches. He has a poet’s gift for understanding and eloquence. In his eulogy he said:

The vast majority of Americans—the majority of gun owners—want to do something about this (something to end gun violence). We see that now. And I’m convinced that by acknowledging the pain and loss of others, even as we respect the traditions and ways of life that make up this beloved country—by making the moral choice to change, we express God’s grace.

We don’t earn grace. We’re all sinners. We don’t deserve it. But God gives it to us anyway. And we choose how to receive it. It’s our decision how to honor it. ...

Reverend Pickney once said, ‘Across the South, we have a deep appreciation of history—we haven’t always had a deep appreciation of each other’s history.’ What is true in the South is true for America. Clem understood that justice grows out of

¹ “Upon This Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement, by Allison Calhoun-Brown, Georgia State University. *PS: Political Science and Politics* Vol. 33, No. 2 (Jun., 2000), pp. 168-174. Published by American Political Science Association

recognition of ourselves in each other. That my liberty depends on you being free, too. That history can't be a sword to justify injustice, or a shield against progress, but must be a manual for how to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past—how to break the cycle. A roadway to a better world. He knew that the path of grace involves an open mind—but, more importantly, an open heart.²

It's not the Kingdom if we don't all make it.

Most of the time, the images for the Kingdom of Heaven are of blessings streaming down from on high, an other-worldly gift, unachievable except for God's grace. In classical art, the image has often been of a bird descending, the Holy Spirit descending to earth.

But I tell you the world I want to live in is the one where God's grace is found through each of our efforts to reach one another, to free one another from the fetters of injustice, or poverty, or depression, or loneliness. I would rather see in my mind the birds of the story rising up together than a solitary bird descending.

I came across a poem by Derek Walcott that begins:

Then all the nations of birds lifted together
The huge net of the shadows of this earth
in multitudinous dialects, twittering tongues,
Stitching and crossing it. They lifted up
The shadows of long pines down trackless slopes,
The shadows of glass-faced towers down evening streets,
The shadow of a frail plant on a city sill—
The net rising soundless as night, the birds' cries soundless, until
There was no longer dusk, or season, decline, or weather,
Only this passage of phantasmal light
That not the narrowest shadow dared to sever.³

He does not write about the story when the poem begins. You don't know the story even when the poem ends. But can you see the birds of all nations rising up together to free those who most need freedom? Can you see them straining against the weight of the hemp net? Can you hear the bird song of the others there?

Just that moment, just that moment of lift as the birds fly up with intention of liberation, and fly up together. That moment in the poem lasts forever, though it is never more than a moment.

² "Amazing Grace," by Barak Obama. *We Are the Change We Seek*, edited by E.J. Dionne, Jr. and Joy-Ann Reid, 2017. Pp. 275-276.

³ "The Season of Phantasmal Peace," by Derek Walcott

The way I want to tell it, even the hunter stands in awe at the birds' liberation. Even the hunter says: What is this? If the birds can do this for each other, if they can act this way together, I will go off and sin no more.

It's not the Kingdom unless we all make it. We need to remember the hunter. We need to remember his hunger. We need to allow him his awe, and his regret, and welcome his willingness to change himself for the betterment of the Kingdom.

And we need to remember the baby quail. Her mother, her brothers. We need to remember all of the wings lifting at the same time. This is how grace shakes out: as love for one another. We need to remember that each of us has a place in the Kingdom, and that we can make it, we will make it, we will only make it: together.

This is how grace comes to us in this work. It comes in effort. It comes as love.



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