

Sermon “Dark Night 2: Become a Neighbor”
By Carolyn West for Northbrae, July 19, 2020

Back in my own personal olden days, before I was a mom and interacted with small children every day, I used to teach as a Poet in the Schools. Poets in the Schools is a non-profit organization that brings working poets into classrooms in K-12 public schools to help the kids learn the delight and empowerment they can find in poetry.

I taught almost every grade at different points along the way, but my sweet spot was Fourth Graders. That’s 9 and 10-year olds. What a marvelous age! The kids are old enough to have learned to read and write and are ready to leap into self-expression. But they are not so old that adolescence is at the door— or isn’t yet, while it is for everyone else. Fourth Graders are smart, curious, Master of Childhood, and they are not yet embarrassed to give you a hug at the end of class.

One of the lessons my Fourth Graders taught me is the seemingly contradictory way to ignite your imagination.

Growing up in my family, the imagination was suspect. It dealt with, as Shakespeare put it in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, “airy nothingness.” I didn’t believe that. I couldn’t. My imagination wasn’t making things out of airy nothingness, but out of many other tools in a creative’s tool kit. I would stand up for imagination any day of the week. Though it took me years to learn to drive that particular vehicle.

I was teaching at West Portal Elementary School in South San Francisco. By mid-semester, I was a bit tired of the standard lesson plans that I’d put together with the help of a veteran teacher. I knew the kids were each of them blessed with exuberant imaginations, and I really wanted them to feel free to write in their own ways, not in ways prescribed by grown-ups.

So I set about talking about imagination, and how in poetry you can fill a box made of words with your wildest ideas. I talked and leaped about the room, I wrote a line or two on the chalk board. The kids were great, attentive, smiling, ready. So I said, “Okay! Time to write your poem!”

They stared at me. For a long time. Before the boldest girl said, “Aren’t you supposed to tell us what to write?” “Oh, no. You know how to write. Just go ahead,” I said. “But what do we write about?” she asked. “It’s up to you! Use your imagination!” Thirty utterly confused Fourth Grade faces stared back at me. “How do we do that?” the bold girl asked.

I realized that I had no idea what to tell them. Could it be that the imagination is airy nothingness after all? How do you pull things out of airy nothingness? How do you engage your imagination?

This is sort of where I left us last week: up in the allegorical air. Wile E. Coyote had just run straight off the mesa cliff. Indiana Jones just took a step of faith above a deadly steep ravine. And a man was tasting a strawberry. Three cartoons; one by Warner Brothers; one by Lucasfilm; one courtesy of a Zen master. Each of them a product of someone’s imagination, given over to yours. Each character was anchored in the world we share, and then not. Then left up in the air.

Because they are cartoons—illustrations, koans, comedies— we find ourselves using them as metaphor, as comedy. We use them to escape from our everyday lives, or, sometimes, as a way to awaken to the world as it is. How sweet is the strawberry!

Staring into the eyes of perplexed fourth graders I realized that the imagination must be attached to the world, or it will be lost. A few days ago I sent out in the morning messages an image of monarch butterfly chrysalises. Each was at a different stage of metamorphosis, from those in a chrysalis so opaque green it looked more like a pea pod than a changing room for an animate being. Others were growing transparent enough to show us the markings of a monarch almost ready to fly. But every single chrysalis, in order to be effective, needs to be firmly attached to something in the world. My job as a poet in the schools, was first to anchor the kids to the world they knew, and then to show them how to use their metaphoric wings.

Last week we read three sayings from the spare, startling *Gospel of Thomas*. The three together were a call to attention. Don't go looking into another realm for God's love. Look here, right here, in the world around you, Jesus teaches. One of these sayings is in our readings again today:

113. His disciples said to him, "When will the kingdom come?" "It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, 'Look, here it is,' or 'Look, there it is.' Rather, the father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it."

For so many years, Christianity was taught to me as if we must only have our sights set on the next world, the heavenly realm, the rising again, the ever after. This is the teaching because our world is corrupt, human beings are corrupt. And we are no good until we are "saved."

But we can only imagine the great beyonds; they are not from our world of experience. Most of what we imagine of heaven or the fiery bellows has rolled down through the generations from scholars and priests, often cobbled together out of cultural superstitions. Just a couple of days ago I saw a comic online of St. Peter with his book at the Pearly Gates wearing a face mask and saying to a newcomer soul, "No mask? No entry!"

In the Gospels Jesus often points beyond himself towards God ("Don't mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself" is also a Buddhist teaching). But he returns again, and again, and again to the world we live in, the people at the table, who are sick or scared. This is world we see too, when we aren't distracted by ideas of the otherworldly. When we see it clearly, is it even possible to turn away?

The older I get the more clearly I see that Jesus does not point to a wholly imaginary world, but rather the one we live in now. Today. On Earth as it is. A vision that starts now. And becomes.

In another classroom, years later, one January while teaching one of the groups of Coming of Age kids (so 6th to 8th graders), we started talking about Martin Luther King, Jr. The day we honor him was coming up. I wanted to talk about Rosa Parks and the march for voting rights from Selma to Montgomery,

Alabama. I wanted to talk about racial justice, and what it takes to make the world a better place. The kids are smart. They knew all the stories, and in fact, they were teaching me about some of the details.

“So how do we do it?” I asked them. “How do we continue the struggle to make the world a better place?”

Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek, to go the extra mile. To sell our possessions and give the money to the poor. To follow him.

Dr. King and Representative John Lewis, who were leaders in the Civil Rights Movement, have told us to organize, to start with voting rights, to respond to violence with non-violence. To keep your eyes on the prize. Know what you’re up against and work together to make the world better for each other.

All of that is true and righteous; they showed us how. And yet, here we are again, here we are still, holding on, holding on. As the video by Mike Brayton and Christine Heeren show, the work continues. The work to make the world a better place needs us all. It is our work now. But how, where do we start?

The story that Ron read this morning is so well known, it was one of the first Gospel Stories I ever learned. And yet I was surprised when I read in this translation by David Bentley Hart the questions Jesus asks, “Who of these three does it seem to you became a neighbor to the man fallen among bandits?”

Who *became* a neighbor? Here is the first clue, then. The love of your neighbor is an act of becoming. It is not static. It is not an address or a group of kin. We may none of us be a good neighbor, but we become one.

The Samaritan became a neighbor when he was able to see the hurt in front of him and not turn away. He was able to imagine past his own life and into the life of another man. He imagined the pain the beaten man felt and could envision the care that man needed.

But that’s just a story. How do we do it? How do we work to turn the world we have into the vision we want for our children, and our children’s children? We can’t just walk out one day, having decided that we are going to change the world, and expect that the world to changed.

First, we must see the earth as it is. How else will we know what the needs of our neighbors are? Then, too, we must see the people of the earth as they are. How else will we be able to provide for their needs, now? Hunger is rarely just an empty plate. It is a lost job, a child whose parents are both working extra shifts; a food desert in the inner city. The Gospels call us to see them as they are. Love them as they are now. Love them, *because* they are.

For a long time now, I have been wondering (silently, mostly) if the place to learn about the love Jesus taught is not in churches but in the streets. It is in the hospitals, where nurses check on the wellbeing of the sick. We learn about the love in the schools and libraries where adults teach kids how to read and

how to think for themselves. It's in the safe houses, food pantries, free clinics. We learn about love in recovery shelters, the youth choirs, the community gardens, on the front lines of restoring the earth to health. Maybe we can learn the good news in our current tongue from the people who get up every morning and give their time and expertise to love on earth as it is, and the people of it.

Starting this August, I am going to start a new program at Northbrae. One Sunday a month, instead of a Guest Preacher, I will invite a *Guest Teacher* to speak to us. Someone who is at work in the community who is doing the hard work of becoming a neighbor, and who can teach us how we can join in.

We are a community who is full of people who have dedicated their lives to becoming a neighbor. I hope you all will guide me to people who can inspire us. We are also a community who are fragile, at risk in this time of coronavirus. We may not be able to get up Monday with our masks and gloves and be on the front lines. But we can learn from and support to those who do.

I was recently given a small grant, for which I am truly grateful. We pay our guest preachers, and we will our guest teachers, too. Because of my grant, Northbrae will be able to donate directly to our teachers' organizations, so that their work goes farther.

We will start this program in August with Rev. Larry Foy, who was a classmate of mine at San Francisco Theological a few years back. He has been a UCC minister and also a community organizer, advocate for the incarcerated and those returning from prison to their communities. He is also on the staff of the Interfaith movement for Human Integrity.

In the months to come in, I will bring in climate activists, food pantry organizers, educators who help children grow into compassionate adults. I am very excited about this program, and hope it will inspire you, too.

Becoming a neighbor begins on Earth as it is. That is the anchor for our imagination. We can see the world in its brokenness and love it. As we do, let us unfurl our glorious imaginations. Through that human capacity, we can feel our way into our neighbors' shoes; see our way to helping them heal; and work our way together to the Beloved Community.

I remember one class with Larry when we were talking about inclusion in our churches and our society, and Larry laughed and said, "It's not the Kingdom unless we all make it." We all have to get there, yes. Yes. Absolutely. We all need to be present in the Kingdom of God. But we also each of us have to make that Kingdom, make it possible. Make it real. May it be so.

Theseus says,

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
5Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold—
10That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to Earth, from Earth to heaven.
And as imagination bodies forth
15The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.
Such tricks hath strong imagination,
That if it would but apprehend some joy,
20It comprehends some bringer of that joy.
Or in the night, imagining some fear,
How easy is a bush supposed a bear!

Wm Shakespeare, Midsummer