Call to Worship

Lighting the Chalice Flame

Hymn #209  O Come, You Longing, Thirsty Souls

Reading  Pay Homage
by Rumi, tr. by Daniel Ladinsky

If God said,
“Rumi, pay homage to everything
that has helped you enter my arms,”
there would not be one experience of my life,
not one thought, not one feeling,
not any act,
I would not bow to.

Prayer

Hymn #123  Spirit of Life

Reading  “Dig Here,” the Angel Said
by St. John of the Cross, tr. by Daniel Ladinsky

She caught me off guard when my soul said to me,
“Have we met?”
So surprised was I to hear her speak like that
I chuckled.
She began to sing a tale: “There was once a hardworking man
who used to worry so much because he could
not feed and clothe his children and
wife the way he wanted.
There was a beautiful little chapel in the village
where the man lived and one day while
he was praying, an angel appeared.

The angel said, ‘Follow me.’ And he did out into an ancient forest. ‘Now dig here,’ the angel said. And the man felt strength in his limbs he had not known since youth and with just his bare hands he dug deep and found a lost treasure, and his relationship with the world changed.”

Finding your soul’s beauty does that — gives us tremendous freedom from worry.

“Dig here,” the angel said — “in your soul, in your soul.”

Homily

Here we are in the woods at least, if not an ancient forest, gathered in this clearing in the beloved company of colleagues and the shelter of this space. Gathered to create a place of respite and exploration, a place that invites you to dig here! In your soul, in your soul.

Temenos, this place we have gathered, refers to a place set off, particularly the sacred space surrounding a temple or an altar. Carl Jung is said to have used the term with reference to the inner space within us where the making of our souls takes place. And so we have come here to rest a while, set off, in a time made sacred by our intentions. We invite you to let these hours of retreat be a time for rest, for soul work, for deepening reflection, for dreaming and for collegial conversations and support.

In these next precious hours together, we invite you to practice self care. We invite you to seek, to offer, to receive the blessings of a time apart, of caring colleagues on the journey of ministry, of a time of exploration.

And we invite you to dig here by exploring responses to the question, “Whose am I?” Not answers maybe, because it is a question that eludes a simple, singular, correct answer. But to reflect, to respond, to begin to put into words your experiences, your thoughts, your feelings, and the meanings they suggest as you ponder the questions — “Whose am I?” “To whom to I belong?” “Who or what holds me accountable?” “Where does my authority come from?”
The questions arise, as you may be aware among our Unitarian Universalist colleagues, from having been put forth in response to a story told by our colleague Jon Luopa at conversations about excellence in ministry which took place in Seattle in December 2008, a little over a year ago.

Sarah Lammert convened a rich discussion at that event and then carried the question to the UUMA Exec. Your Exec was enthused and about the potential of the question to engage us in meaningful conversation and has gained grant funding to train chapter volunteers next June during Professional Days in a process to lead discussions within our chapters. We will all be encouraged to reflect and to preach on the question.

It is a weighty enough question to merit our early and ongoing attention, and we are serving as an informal pilot study group.

The question arises from digging deeper into “Who am I?” For there can perhaps be no meaningful response to that question that stands outside of relationship. We are relational beings.

Certainly for those of us who embrace process metaphysics, relationships among entities and the events that move us from instance to instance, from moment to moment in our lives are always in the context of a complex system of interdependent entities, where the decisions — the choices we make — and the actions we take create new possibilities in complex interplay with other entities.

For the concept of God to have useful meaning, Charles Hartshorne argues in his process theology, God must be in relationship with us. To be in meaningful relationship requires the necessary reciprocity of change and transformation. So God cannot be immutable, never changing — quite the opposite, God responds to us and is changed by the relationships God enjoys with us.

Our covenantal gathering recognizes that relationship matters more than creed. “Whose am I” is less a question of belief or theology and more one of relationship. In our sometimes fundamentalist independence and anti-authoritarianism, we are in danger of losing humility, of placing our separate selves above the relationships that hold us in context and that define us. It is through relationship that we are called to account, supported in the struggles and celebrations of the work, and inspired.

The question of “Whose are we?” is a deeply religious one. One that calls us to reflect on the nature of our most important relationships, on our ability to respond to them, on our responsibilities. It demands from you a bare-handed digging into your soul, seeking to uncover treasure. Treasure that may be lost or forgotten in the day-to-
day realities of struggles, frustrations, despair, and grief. Treasure that may be hidden under counting members, balancing budgets, and supervising staff. But it is treasure that may very well transform your relationship with the world, your ministry, your life. It is worth digging, bare-handed, into the soil to uncover and bring forth.

Tim House, in the sermon Libby sent out to you several days ago as part of our suggested reading packet, offers several possible responses to “Whose am I?” — not an exhaustive list, of course, but perhaps a starting point.

We belong, he says, to the divine light, to Ein Sof. We belong to the dance of matter and energy. We belong to the Interdependent Web. We belong to one another.

Or you might answer that we belong to God, to the Universe, to Mother Earth, to Life itself.

We invite you to reflect on the question. To ponder it and live into it over these next nearly 24 hours together. To give voice to what may yet be tender and tentative responses, and to gently dig them out, examine them, polish them, and hold them up to catch the gleaming light.

To facilitate that, we have planned two small group experiences, modeled on small group ministry or covenant group process of deep listening. — of hearing each other into speech. One this afternoon and another tomorrow morning as we invite you to reflect on to whom do you belong and on who holds you accountable and how that enriches and enlivens your life and your ministry.

This evening we will have the opportunity to hear Nancy Dean describe her odyssey of ministry with the hope that hearing her experience will provide yet another window through which to view responses to the question.

Whose are we? We hope you will feel that you belong to your small group, that you can entrust them with your tender, yet forming responses. And that you will hold each other in care and provide a context that encourages the exploration — the digging for the treasure that already lies waiting in your soul.

Finding that treasure, knowing to whom or to what we belong, and embracing our relationship with it has the potential to grant us the tremendous freedom St. John of the Cross cited: freedom from worry.

And that will no doubt help us feed our own selves, nourish our spiritual lives, and support us in the work of ministry.

May it be so.
Hymn #90  From All the Fret and Fever of the Day

Benediction

Extinguishing the Chalice Flame