

Roots and Wings

Over this 70-year's journey of St. Andrew congregation, I've traveled with you only seven months. But, though short, this time that we are in together, is so significant. We are celebrating, who the church has been and who it is now. We are remembering, and learning from stories shared, and experiences reflected upon. We are looking with honesty and with transparency, at our conflicts, challenges, shortcomings, respecting differences, owning our strengths. We are being flexible, bending, and finding God's peace at our center.

In this time as we take stock, we reflect upon who we are now, and we prepare for new leadership to grow into the future. The "alleluia" butterflies that children decorated and we celebrated at Easter—bring to mind the inspiring journey of Monarch butterflies. Did you know that when Monarchs migrate, those who leave the US for the warmth of winter in Mexico, finish their life cycle there, die, and never return home? It's their offspring, generations later, who find their way back north. It takes three to four generations to reach the northern United States and Canada again. Each successive generation travels farther north. They wing their way forward, and home, even though they (obviously) have never been there! Like the butterflies, as St. Andrew celebrates the life of this congregation over generations, the journey of the Monarch helps us to imagine winging our way home into an unseen future, from the deep roots of the past.

I've been reflecting upon how much has changed in the past 70 years, since the liturgy of 1953 was used weekly. Much of the change came because of the awareness of who has had power and who has not. . . Women's roles changed, and eventually, ordination was open to them. The words that we used for God changed, so that rather than referring to God exclusively as "HE" and male, we became more inclusive, using non-gender words. We aspire to diverse qualities of Divine love that we want to emulate. From the Civil Rights movement, which began in the 1950s, we learned from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., about non-violent resistance—power: the kind of power that resists threats and force, and brings about the deepest change.

In our scripture from Ephesians today, power is a key theme. We might shy away from thinking about power. We see in our world, that there are tragic abuses of power. Yet, in this scripture, power comes from being rooted and grounded in love. The good news for today is that we are not confined to systems of human power, but called to live anew, with all the fullness of God's love in us.

One of my heroes, the late Georgia Representative John Lewis, once told a columnist for *The Washington Post* that he was "inspired" by the 2020 protests against police violence. "It was so moving and so gratifying to see people from all over America and all over the world saying through their action, 'I can do something. I can say something.'" Rep. Lewis was naming the power of the people.

Yes, it was just a few years ago that Portland was in the daily news. In that time we were experiencing or watching images of power: rubber- bullet guns, flash bangs, fires, lasers, fireworks, and fists. We were also watching the power of the people, through persistent advocacy for justice. Those power struggles sprang from oppression, suppression, human hierarchy, and force. How does our power today, intersect with the power of God, expressed in the first century, in Ephesians?

The writer of Ephesians (many scholars believe probably not the apostle Paul, but someone close to Paul) was concerned about the abandonment of restraint and lack of concern for other. That was a central problem addressed by the letter. That is a pretty accurate diagnosis for our time, too, especially as there deliberate promoters of disinformation, and abuses of power.

The word in Greek that we translate “power” (*energes*) means “to be able.” The message of Ephesians is this: When things are broken, overwhelming and bleak, we can change, because of God’s love in and with us. We have the power to bring about good beyond our imagination through the Holy Spirit. Ephesians is saying: “YES, we can.” This is not an outdated political slogan. It is an expression of the power we have, together. We-- the body of Christ, enlivened by God’s Love. Do we believe that? How do we live it out?

Can we worship our 70th anniversary, with the absence of our dear organist Susan? Yes, we can!

“I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” That is mighty power indeed! What does it mean to be filled with all the fullness of God?

I wonder, if this morning we accepted that fullness, how might we walk away from this service? How might St. Andrew wing forward in the coming months?

There is hierarchical power. It is a power that sometimes forces people to bend to another’s will. When we sing and pray to “Almighty God” it may conjure up images of a god like Thundering Thor, hammering out justice with a bang. But there is another kind of power: an eternal, enlivening source. That power is grounded in relationship. The medieval mystic, musician, and healer Hildegard of Bingen called it “greening” (in Latin, *veriditas*). Dr. Victoria Sweet, a modern-day doctor, has been inspired by Hildegard and said this:

“...Hildegard’s implicit idea, which for me was revolutionary, was that as a doctor I should be not only a mechanic of the body, looking for what is broken and trying to fix it, but also a gardener of the body, nourishing *veriditas*, and removing what is in its way.”

Many of you are gardeners and have gorgeous, vibrant gardens of flowers, fruits, vegetables, and herbs. You know far better than I that when you nurture a garden, it is an ongoing activity. You keep removing weeds to make room for the healthy growth. And, it is almost magical when you see the plant take root and flourish into something grand and beautiful. That’s power. That power has life. Ephesians reminds us that we are partners with God. The nurturing power of God is in us and among us to bring new life.

It is essential, and it is the very heart of who we are as people of God, to recognize and to own the power that we have within: relational power. Loving ourselves, and loving others and we love ourselves.

I'm still reading and hearing a lot about how pandemic has changed us. There are many now, still in grief. Not just cranky, but grieving. We've been through a lot, and it's not over. If you are feeling that way, you may be inclined to withdraw from other people. Those feelings are real and understandable. But the fullness of God in you means that there is still a need and drive to belong and be rooted with others. Maybe, right now, is the time to quietly ask yourself, who in my life provides authentic and positive connection? If you have no answer for that, let me invite you to talk to Sister India, or me, or Kyler, or one of our Council members.

But, maybe you are feeling great. Things have gradually been falling back into place. If that is the case, thanks be to God! AND, it's a prime time to think of others who may be struggling. We can be present and offer friendship. The greening power takes hold when our roots talk with each other.

Gardening takes constant diligence. When Rep. John Lewis was asked about people who feel as though they have already been giving it their all and nothing seems to change, he said: "You must be able and prepared to give until you cannot give any more. We must use our time and our space on this little planet that we call Earth to make a lasting contribution, to leave it a little better than we found it, and now that need is greater than ever before." We are rooted and grounded in love, and, with God's grace, yes—we can meet those needs.

Back in the medieval days, Hildegard of Bingen wrote: "Humanity, take a good look at yourself. Inside, you've got heaven and earth, and all of creation. You're a world—everything is hidden in you." The fullness of God! In closing, I share this poem, written by Nancy Fierro, based on the thoughts of [Hildegard of Bingen](#):

Life breath
 Health, wholeness and holiness
 Emerald vitality,
 Sparkling water, Damp stone
 Ventilating wind
 Fiery glow
 Igniting the world into being
 Illuminating all creatures,
 Giving them color and vigor.
 Root of growth
 Proliferation of spring
 Making grasses laugh

Plants sprout
 And flowers blossom.
 Joy of youthfulness, Zest of the aging
 Energy of the heart loving
 And the imagination creating
 Fragrance of a life lived with compassion and
 justice
 Green sap of the tree of life, drenched in the
 sun
 Exuberant fountain flowing from the Living
 Light
 Bright power of the Luminous Word born from
 the greenest branch
 Grace and healing tonic of the Holy Spirit
 Divine Wisdom's sweet exhalation.