

Walking with the Spirit
Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder
United Church of Strafford, Vermont
June 18, 2023 Third Sunday after Pentecost
Micah 6:6-8; Matthew 8: 9:9-13, 18-26

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Third Sunday after Pentecost and eve of Juneteenth. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online, and welcome to the Cantornote Church Musicians—it is wonderful to have you here!

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. Our congregation has voted to establish a reparations fund for the hardships they have had to endure from colonial times to this day. We give thanks for the opportunity to share in the bounty of this place and to protect it in the spirit of indigenous wisdom which sees all life and the land itself as gifts of the Spirit and manifestations of the Spirit's presence.

Congregation. Communion. Compassion. Comfort. These are important words in our church life, and they all begin with a form of the same Latin prefix which means with or together.

Church is about walking the journey of life and sacred way of the Spirit together, and yet we are all different, so it takes another important com- word: communication, and the kind of generous hearted lovingkindness that Jesus showed that does not judge or dwell on differences, that forgives rough edges and welcomes diversity.

Please greet one another after the service extending compassion and communicating support especially to those you do not know or those who seem most different from you, walking together in the Spirit of love.

Call to Worship: The 17th Century pastor and poet George Herbert wrote a poem called “The Elixir.” It says:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things Thee to see,
And what I do in anything
To do it as for Thee....

The poem gives a beautiful image for how to see the Spirit in our material lives: like a person looking at the pane of glass in a window, who then shifts to looking through to what is beyond:

A man that looks on glass,
On it may stay his eye;
Or it he pleaseth, through it pass,
And then the heav'n espy.

The poem also encourages us to bring that vision of the Spirit into our daily activities to make the mundane sacred:

All may of Thee partake:
Nothing can be so mean,
Which with this tincture—"for Thy sake"—
Will not grow bright and clean.
A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine:
Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws,
Makes that and th' action fine.

Finally the poem refers to alchemy and the sorcerer's stone, saying that discerning the Spirit in all things transforms them and shows creation's true worth:

This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold;
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for less be told.

The Spirit is in all things, and all things are in the Spirit. The love that we name God holds all things in the universe together as one and flows everywhere. The teachings of Jesus open the Spirit's sacred way through every situation for us to follow. The Spirit's guidance leads us when we are unclear how to walk.

Let us worship together seeking Spirit and giving thanks for it at the same time.

Children's Time— The classic Robert McCloskey book *Blueberries for Sal* tells the story of a mother and her little daughter, Sal, who go up Blueberry Hill in Maine to bring home berries for canning.

Sal starts out well, picking three berries and dropping them in her pail, kerplink, kerplank, kerplunk. But then she makes the mistake of eating one, and they are so good that she ends up eating even the three she collected.

She is following her mother along, but gets distracted as she stuffs her mouth with berries and then has to run to catch up. Finally, Sal sits in a particularly thick patch and when she has

eaten them all she realizes that she has lost her mother. She thinks she hears her but it turns out to be a mother bear. If you want to know what happens next, you'll have to read the book.

A few minutes ago we read one of the most famous and beloved verses in all scriptures from the Prophet Micah, who said “You have told us, O God, what is good; and what do you require of us but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God?”

This is a beautiful recipe for the best life we can live—the life that the Spirit created and evolved us to live: to do justice means the Golden Rule applied equally to all people, and loving kindness means being kind to everyone, not because we think they are worthy, but because we just love being kind. And if we walk humbly with our God, we walk grounded in our full truth, flaws and all, trying to follow the sacred way every step of the journey.

The thing is, like Sal, we find the blueberries along the way so tasty that we get distracted, and next thing we know we have lost our mother God and are in danger of following a bear instead.

There are a few ways we can avoid or get out of this trouble. First, we can be mindful and not get so caught up in things that we lose our way. Second, when we do get lost we can seek our way back and call out for help. Third, we can do the thing that helped Sal most, which was listening, and yet Sal showed that understanding what we hear is tricky.

There is a powerful spiritual practice that can help us be mindful, call for help and learn to discern what we are hearing... Prayer!

So now let us pray together the Lord's Prayer...

Walking with the Spirit

The Prophet Micah spoke to a divided and endangered nation, voicing God's outrage at the wealthy and powerful whose greed and injustice opposed God's way of compassion and mercy. Let us hear Micah again:

“You have told us, O God, what is good;
and what do you require of us
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with our God?”

The *Tao Te Ching* was written around the same time in another society that was divided and endangered. It says,

If I have even just a little sense
I will go along the Great Way [or “the Tao”]
and my only fear will be of turning from it.
The Way is not hard,
but people tend to stray, and stay sidetracked.
Be aware when things are out of balance.
Stay centered within the Tao.
[Tao Te Ching Chapter 53 compiled from a variety of translations]

Jesus lived in another divided, unjust and unequal society that was on the edge of destruction, where the ruling class had abandoned God’s way. Jesus summed up the callings of both Micah and the *Tao Te Ching* in two words, saying to Matthew, “Follow me.” Matthew was a tax collector—he served the wealthy and powerful oppressors—so Jesus is saying to that whole segment of society, if you want to save yourselves and your nation and return to the sacred Way, follow me.

If we have even just a little sense we will see that there is a way we can go that can make all the difference both to our lives and to our world, a way that leads to light and life. If we have even just a little sense, our only fear will be of turning from that way onto ways that sidetrack us from being useful to the Spirit that wants to transform human society into a realm of love and justice.

Wisdom teachers of all times and cultures have insisted that this should be the one central question and concern of our life: how can I walk with God, how can I follow the Spirit and the sacred Way, in my unique life, in this time and place on earth?

The trick, of course, is that the answer is different for us each. There are certain basic principles that can be applied to a variety of situations, like doing justice and loving kindness, but there is no roadmap of the sacred way, and humanity has entered a dangerous time of huge change brought about by the cumulative impact of our rapidly escalating technological powers. The most important thing we need for our spiritual journey through this time is to learn how to find the way to walk humbly with our God through any situation we face.

Our spiritual tradition has a three part approach to discerning the Spirit’s will. The first part is prayer—to watch and pray.

The Tao Te Ching says that in order to keep on the sacred Way we should be “Watchful, like someone crossing a winter stream. Alert, like people aware of danger.” (*Chapter 15*) The danger is that we might fall into distraction and get sidetracked, and it could be pleasure or pain,

greed or despair, overwork or overbusyness that gets us lost. We need to practice mindfulness and watch every step if we want to find and stay on the sacred way.

It helps us discern where the Spirit is leading when we listen prayerfully to our deepest spiritual center where the gifts of wisdom, intuition and insight appear.

Jesus says in today's gospel passage that the Spirit of love in him is a healer who comes to the sick, not to the healthy. Prayer declares that we are among those in need of help, in need of mercy, in need of guidance. Blessed are the meek who know this and seek the Spirit.

Prayer opens our hearts, enabling the other two tools to work. The second one is finding directional signs around us in writings or art or nature or experiences or events. The wisdom and guidance of the Spirit can show through any of them if we have the eyes to see and ears to hear.

Bill Burden used to say how miraculous this was. He described his practice of praying about a situation and then opening the Bible at random and finding just the word he needed in that moment.

Mark Kutolowski is teaching a series of workshops starting next Saturday about "Praying with Creation," to open us to discern how the Spirit speaks to us in nature. You can read about it on the [Metanoia of Vermont website](#).

We need to pray and read the signs, and the third tool of discernment is the help of a wise friend or spiritual guide or counselor, or the help of a support group or congregation.

It can be dangerous to rely only on prayer and reading without this third approach. A classmate of my brother's believed that he was called to undertake a fast, based on his interpretation of scripture and prayer. He did it without guidance or support. He fasted so extremely and so long that he suffered organ failure and died alone in his apartment. His case was extreme, but we can get ourselves in all kinds of trouble by trying to follow the spiritual path without human guidance. We can give up just when we need to keep going, or we can keep going just when we need to respect our limits and rest.

It helps to have at least one other mind considering our interpretations and choices, and the wiser and more experienced and compassionate that mind is, the better.

We may not have perfect clarity about the way ahead even with these three tools of discernment. A stranger walked by Matthew's tax collecting booth and said nothing but, "Follow me." We may know that voice when we hear it, or like Matthew, we may have to go on a hunch.

And it may be that the Pharisees, meaning the religious establishment or cultural elite, will tell us that we are going all wrong. Or the world may abandon us as it had the woman who reached out and touched the hem of Jesus' robe. People may laugh at us or worse. We may have to take that risk, like the leader of the synagogue who was pushed to it by the death of his beloved daughter.

We may not ever know that we have chosen wisely, that we have walked with the Spirit and taken the sacred way, but if we have done justice, loved kindness, and sought to the best of our ability to walk humbly with our God, we can rest in the faith that our effort was good enough for the Spirit to put to use. As Paul said, "All things work together for the good for those who love God."

Let us pray in silence seeking the Spirit now, seeking direction for the next step in whatever situation we face that needs discernment. Let us pray a listening prayer, letting go of thoughts and feelings, opening to the Spirit that is seeking us...

"My Father"
by Mel Goertz

On my sixteenth birthday
my Father gave me a typewriter.
Little did he know
what poems I would write
or what meadows
I would wander.
I remember the tap tap tap
of his fingers
as page after page
flowed into day.
A chip off the old block
he always said.
A twinkle in your Mother's eye.
Although at times he was fit
to be tied,
my Father loved me.