

Hearts and Minds

Rev. Joseph Connolly

“Change your hearts and minds, for the dominion of heaven has come near. The dominion of heaven is about to break in on you.” — Matthew 3:2.

At the time we had the announcements this morning you heard me say this afternoon I will be representing you, this church, at an Ecclesiastical Council of the Susquehanna Association in Homer. We shall listen to a presentation by the candidate, Rachel Ditch, who will offer portions of her ordination paper.

Now, when I say I will be representing this church you need to understand an Ecclesiastical Council is not a clergy function. It is a function of the laity. Lay members of our congregation are not just invited to join me. You are vital.

Indeed, in our tradition ordination is in no way about any kind of hierarchy. In the Congregational tradition there is no organizational chart or power structure. We are one.

So, an Ecclesiastical Council of our Association says there needs to be only 6 authorized clergy present. But there needs to be at least 20 members of the laity on hand. If my math is right, by way of sheer numbers that means at an Ecclesiastical Council members of the laity are three times more vital than members of the clergy.

Now, each church in the Association has been sent a copy of Rachel’s paper so we could all read it in advance. Therefore, after Rachel makes her presentation, each church will get to ask at least two questions of Rachel based on her paper and presentation.

To be clear, I am a member of the Committee on Authorized Ministry of the Susquehanna Association. So we, the committee, have walked through this process with Rachel. We were with her as she graduated from SUNY Cortland and she asked to be a Member in Discernment (which is what we call someone seeking ordination these days).

We were with her as she went off to the wilds of Boston, Massachusetts where she attended and graduated from the Boston University School of Theology. We offered her advice as she was in the process of writing her ordination paper.

I like Rachel and I think she will make an outstanding, wonderful pastor. By the way, that opinion will not stop me from asking her questions this afternoon.

Now, on the title page of Rachel’s ordination paper there is an extra sub-title line. It says the paper is (quote:) “Appropriately Subtitled— *All I Think I Know About God in (about) Twenty Pages.*” Then the paper opens with a quote from the late theologian, mystic and social activist Thomas Merton from the work *Thoughts on Solitude*.

(Quote:) “My God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself and the fact that I think that I am following Your will does not mean I am actually doing so.”

“But I believe the desire to please You does in fact please You. And I hope I have that desire in all I am doing. I hope I will never do anything apart from that desire.”

“And I know if I do this You will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will

I trust You always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for You are ever with me and You will never leave me to face my perils alone.” (Slight pause.)

We find these words in the work known as Matthew: “Change your hearts and minds, for the dominion of heaven has come near. The dominion of heaven is about to break in on you.” (Slight pause.)

I think we, in the Twenty-first Century— world-wide, not just Americans— are afflicted with a very specific disease. We are convinced we know everything there is to know and we are in control of everything and we are right about everything.

I’ve got bad news and good news on that count. Here’s the bad news: we are wrong. We do *not* know everything. We are *not* in control of everything. We are *not* right about everything.

The good news? The idea that we do know everything, we are in control of everything and are right about everything is not a simply a Twenty-first Century disease. The people to whom John preached had the same disease.

I think one of the mistakes we make when we read this text is we see it with blinders. Paradoxically, these are the same blinders worn by our First Century cousins who heard what John said.

The specific blinders to which I refer are the ones just mentioned— thinking we know, thinking we are in control, thinking we are right. Let me unpack that a bit. When we hear the words which say (quote:) “Many Pharisees and Sadducees came for baptism and John said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?’” we are making several assumptions.

The assumptions are false. But we make them because we think we know and we are in control and we are right.

We hear the terms Pharisees and Sadducees and think “those are the bad people.” Except they would not have been considered bad in the world John inhabited. They would have been considered upstanding citizens, the best of the best.

Then we hear John’s question to them (quote:) “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” And that question simply puzzles us as it would have puzzled them. Do notice there is no response recorded.

John doubts their sincerity. I think John doubts their sincerity because the Baptizer realizes they have come to the wilderness not to be Baptized. What they want is to buy fire insurance. They think participation will give them protection. If they simply do something— a ritual— *Baptism*— then a deep, meaningful relationship with God will be unnecessary, superfluous.

In short, when they see John Baptizing they *think they can* know, *think they can* be in control, *think they are* right. John, on the other hand, is clear: ritual does not produce a relationship with God nor does it produce what a relationship with God is about.

What John insists is a relationship with God only happens when we are willing to change our hearts and our minds. All of which is to say thinking we know, thinking we are in control, thinking we are right is not solid ground for a relationship with God.

Why? Let me repeat that quote from Thomas Merton and used by Rachel in full.

“My God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself and the fact that I think I am following Your will does not mean I am actually doing so.”

“But I believe the desire to please You does in fact please You. And I hope I have that desire in all I am doing. I hope I will never do anything apart from that desire.”

“And I know if I do this You will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust You always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for You are ever with me and You will never leave me to face my perils alone.” (Slight pause.)

God does not, in any way, wish to control us. God is not manipulative... and yet God is in control. That God is in control is, I think, not something we like to hear, since we like to know, we like to be in control, we like to be right.

But once we grasp that simple understanding that God reigns, as did Thomas Merton did, that understanding that we are not in charge of the world, then our hearts and our minds can and will be open to change. Why? How? Only then— when we understand we are not in charge— will we have the freedom and the peace to turn our hearts and our minds toward God. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “Let me call your attention to the *Thought for Meditation* from Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal Priest and theologian found in the bulletin today. (Quote:) ‘While Isaiah might have agreed that salvation comes from heaven, I doubt the prophet would have agreed to leave it there. Salvation is not about us going up but about heaven coming down. Salvation that does not include just rulers, an equitable economy, and peace among the nations, would have made Isaiah scratch his head. Heaven may be God’s test kitchen, but the pudding is intended for earth.’ Making the pudding of God here on earth— now that will take a change of hearts and minds.”

BENEDICTION: Let us be present to one another as we go from this place. Let us share our gifts, our hopes, our memories, our pain and our joy. Go in peace for God is with us. Go in joy for God knows every fiber of our being. Go in hope for God reveals to us, daily, that we are a part of God’s new creation. Go in love, for we rest assured, by Christ, Jesus, that God is steadfast. And may the peace of God which surpasses understanding be with us this day and forevermore. Amen.