

“Seeing with Eyes of the Heart” by Kolya Braun-Greiner

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Reign of Christ Sunday

May the eyes of your heart be enlightened! This is an opening prayer of the letter to the community in Ephesus. The latter part of this verse – knowing the hope to which God has called you – I will address in a few moments. My own heart leapt for joy when I discovered that this passage, one of my favorites, was one of the lectionary readings for this Sunday, a day I chose (or it chose me) before I knew what the lectionary was going to be. Verse 18, the focus of this sermon, was the scripture upon which I printed cards for the Christian youth as a blessing for their journey when they graduated from the program with Interfaith Youth for Climate Justice, where I served as a mentor. It expressed my fervent prayer that their eyes would be enlightened to know the hope they are called to

heal God's Creation.

The "eyes of your heart"... What does that mean?!

At the outset, please forgive this sermon being less exegetical in the traditional academic sense than I am accustomed to being. Suffice it to say this passage is known variously as a "thanksgiving prayer" was addressed to a community that has been tossed about by many conflicts internally and externally. I enter this scripture as a portal or as a window into a way of being in these turbulent times in which we find ourselves.

I'd like to begin by sharing the personal meaning this has for me and weave in some of the spiritual understandings offered by our mystical tradition.

Being a mental type I have in recent years become aware that my mind is not always my friend. Perhaps you've had this experience? I began to contemplate whether I've been too much stuck in my head and not dwelling enough in my heart.

I've also been drawn to learn more about new scientific discoveries being made about the energy of the heart and how it can inform or transform our thoughts. Through certain meditations of the heart conducted by a science called heartmath we can access the intelligence of the heart to help us navigate these stressful times. Even Shakespeare said: "Go to your bosom: Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know."

And lo and behold, I have discovered that we have a deep and abiding tradition that affirms the **wisdom** of the heart. I've been fascinated by scriptures like that of Psalm 51:6 which says that God "desires truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart." The secret heart?!

One of my favorite mystics, Howard Thurman in his Meditations of the Heart offers this insight: "The secrets of the heart

are the raw material of the genuine spirit of the individual. God knows the secret heart.”

Thurman’s meditations are full of ways to see through the eyes of the heart. He invites us to “keep alive the dream in the heart” and his prayer is “I will lift up my eyes to love, that I may not close the door of my heart to the knocking hard, the tender cry, the anxious reach.” His prayer reminds me of the beautiful lyric in a hymn I wish I’d thought of last week for us to sing says – “I want to be like Jesus in my heart” or as it continues and as Thurman said, “I want to be more loving in my heart.”

If we look into the origins of meaning to this phrase in the Hebrew scriptures, it most often represents a metaphor for a mystical reunion with God which offers transformation of the whole person, ergo, to “know the “hope to which you are called.”

Our modern minds think of the heart as the center of emotions, but in all of the Abrahamic faiths Cynthia Bourgeaux says, “it is first and foremost an organ of spiritual perception.” She cites an ancient practice to cultivate this perception in which one places “the mind in the heart” and the head descends to the heart.

And what happens? Bourgeaux describes it like this: “It’s primary purpose to look beyond the obvious, the boundaried surface of things, and see a deeper reality, emerging from some unknown profundity, which plays lightly upon the surface of this life without being caught there: a world where meaning, insight and clarity come together in a whole different way.” Have you ever experienced this?

I have experienced this most profoundly in the natural world and I do believe that it is the common experience which brought my fellow members of Earth & Spirit together. Seeing deeply beyond the “boundaried surface of things” at places

like Dayspring, I experience an awareness that Earth will communicate God's word if we attend to it. If, as Richard Rohr says "all scripture is metaphor," then the first word of God, that of Creation can also offer meaningful metaphors for our lives, such as the Red Shouldered Hawk I see effortlessly soaring for many minutes without flapping its wings arises in me the scripture "raise me up on eagle's wings" and poses the question, how can I navigate the changing winds of life more effortlessly?

As Robin Wall Kimmerer says, "We don't have to figure out everything by ourselves: there are intelligences other than our own, teachers all around us." Through these teachers and teachings offered God's Creation we may experience these teachers as witnesses to God's presence with us as affirmed in our liturgy today. Meanings emerge of God's wisdom present in the body of the Universal Christ – everywhere and in every thing, as Richard Rohr says. As today is the Reign of Christ Sunday, may we affirm that through Christ all things were created and in Christ all things "hold together" (Col. 1:16-17) – the fullness of God's body. How can we also hear the earth hungering and thirsting for justice? Our brothers and sisters of the other than human world – all our relations as St. Francis and Native Americans say.

This kind of closely attending can inspire a yearning to tend God's Creation and fulfill our community commitment to "care for every part of creation." A regular practice of seeing the natural world with the eyes of our heart can inspire love and awe and respect not only for the beauty of creation but of its power to heal and restore life. It also has the power to destroy life, but much our current climate conditions that are destroying life are caused by our own living out of balance with and disrespect for the rhythms that sustain life.

Offering opportunities through nature hikes for our community to witness the healing power of God's creation and experience solace that nature can provide during these turbulent times

has been one way that Earth & Spirit mission group is fulfilling our call. This is a hope to which we are called.

My work at Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake has been intense this year as we have gone virtual with the Faithful Green Leaders Training that I helped create and co-facilitate. With your financial support we have trained over 200 congregation members from 82 congregations ranging from the Eastern Shore to Frederick and up to Lancaster, PA And many of these green teams are “making all things new” through restoration and green energy projects to protect the health of their local watersheds. They are answering the hope to which they’ve been called.

One of IPC’s most exciting congregation partners is Stillmeadow Community Fellowship, located in Baltimore’s Gwynns Falls watershed. Their congregation is in the process of removing invasive plant species from their congregational grounds and reforesting a large portion of their property to create a 10 acre forested “Peace Park”. Stillmeadow is also exploring innovative projects on their property for future installation to prevent flooding and polluted storm water. They have installed a native plant garden through the National Wildlife Federation’s “Sacred Grounds” program and are the home to an urban apiary (bee hives). As part of the forest revitalization project they have grown and are planting 2,000 saplings in their forest which will serve as an ecological education center for the community. I can’t wait to visit the Peace Park when it opens more widely to the public.

I find hope through these projects as I observe the earth’s abundant capacity for regeneration if we respect and cooperate with its natural systems. I turn to Howard Thurman again: “The earth beneath our feet is the great womb of which the life upon which my body depends comes in utter abundance.”

Where do we see with the eyes of our heart this utter abundance of the earth?

Some of you know that I am slowly plodding through writing a book which I hope to publish next year called *Nature Reveals God's Nature: Attending and Tending Creation*. The theme of seeds most aptly expresses the wonder I experience of the earth's abundance. As I wandered the fields of Dayspring yesterday I was reminded of the waning autumn days during my childhood in western Michigan, I marveled at the proliferation of Milkweed seeds bursting forth to be carried by the wind like little parachutes across the fields. The pregnant pods of Milkweed emit their mother lode of investment in the next summer season. The abundance of seeds a single Milkweed plant produces seems mysteriously extreme, the kind of "high superfluosity of God" that Robinson Jeffers depicts in his poem "The Excesses of God." Why so many seeds from a single plant?

As a botanist and indigenous woman, Robin Wall Kimmerer is also fascinated by plants and their abundant giving. I regret that I was not able to take the class on her book Braiding Sweetgrass with Seekers, but having read the book, I have been deeply touched by her insights and teachings. In light of abundant giving, she says "Even a wounded world is feeding us." Two teachings from Braiding Sweetgrass offer a way of seeing earth's abundance with the eyes of the heart:

One is that of reciprocity – entails a balanced relationship, giving back to earth in kind in response to the abundant giving it offers to us. She says "reciprocity is an investment in abundance for both the eater and the eaten." An example of reciprocity in action is composting – something we can do. We are fortunate in Takoma Park to have municipal composting. The connection with climate change may not be obvious but our food waste in this country contributes a huge amount of greenhouse gases. Food waste that decomposes in landfills releases methane, a greenhouse gas that is at least 28 times more potent than carbon dioxide. Project Drawdown says that worldwide implementation of composting can reduce emissions by

2.3 billion tons over the next 30 years.

And the other teaching of hers I lift up is an Honorable Harvest so appropriate as we are now in the season of celebrating harvest at Thanksgiving, in spite of these challenging times. She invites us to “become indigenous” which means “to grow the circle of healing to include all Creation.” An honorable harvest is one that supports regeneration, a healthy ecosystem which includes healthy soil. After several years of working on climate change, it’s only been in the last 2 years that I’ve learned that soil cannot sequester carbon if it is dead. Living soil is full of microbes and microbes are essential for both soil health and for our own health. But most amazingly they also contribute to the plants’ ability to capture carbon and hold it in the ground.

Howard Thurman’s wisdom expresses this so deeply: “There is at work in the soil a mystery by which the death of a seed is reborn a thousandfold in newness of life.” A newness of life would be supported by a transformation of our relationship with the soil with a food system based upon regenerative agriculture. Soil scientists are now saying that by restoring farming through regenerative practices, each year we can sequester the amount of carbon we are emitting each year. We still need to reduce our emissions – this winning combination will help us lower severity of devastating impacts for future generations – impacts that we are already experiencing. There is a wonderful film about regenerative agriculture that Earth and Spirit Mission Group encourages you to watch called “Kiss the Ground.” Watch for your email with information about viewing the film and how to join us virtually to discuss the film on Saturday November 25 at 7pm. This film talks about the seriousness of climate change we’re facing but then it pivots to a concrete solution that is literally under our feet. It also supports an honorable harvest in which our food production supports a balanced ecosystem. In short, this film offers a hope to which we can be called.

As we enter this week of Thanksgiving, being rooted and grounded in gratitude is the spiritual fuel that can sustain our hope and strengthen our commitment to fulfill the particular hope to which we are called.

Thurman also said, "In the contemplation of the earth I know that I am surrounded by the love of God." May some contemplation of the earth enlighten the eyes of your heart to care for every part of creation, and with your eyes opened by gratitude, may you witness the love of God which surrounds you.