

“The Place Where We Are Right” by Anna Gilcher

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**by Anna Gilcher given at St.
Stephen & the Incarnation
Episcopal Church, Washington,
DC**

“The Place Where We Are Right,” by Yehuda Amichai

*From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
in the spring.*

*The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
Like a yard.*

*But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.*

*And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined*

House once stood.

I like to be right. I like to be good at things. I like to walk through the house I have built on my competence and admire it, noticing the details I have carefully carved into the wood, the polish I have given the floors, the thick rugs I have carefully chosen, the pictures I have lovingly hung on the walls. I like to step out into the yard and see how the light spills out from the windows in the evening, and how inviting it all looks. My house. My comfortable, beautiful house.

Of course if you really looked through the whole house carefully you'd actually find a lot of closets full of things shoved carelessly into them, a basement with teetering piles of half-empty boxes, bags of trash in the corner that haven't quite made it out to the street for pick-up. But I don't like to think about those things. I like to think about my competence, and the ways in which I have created a house that demonstrates that competence to the world, and to myself. A solid house that one can count on. A beautiful house.

I like to be right.

I imagine some of you like to be right, too-perhaps everyone does. It feels good to know how to do things. It gives us a sense of belonging and of control. It feels great to have people ask us our opinion, to be seen as the expert about something. And, God knows, it feels wonderful to be needed and to be helpful. *I know how to fix that problem. I can tell you the right way to go about living your life. Just look at my house. Come on in. Isn't it solidly built? Doesn't it feel*

good in here? Come on in and sit down in the kitchen and we'll talk... (...just don't go into the basement, and don't open those closet doors...)

In the collect today, Sarabeth prayed that God “graft in our hearts the love of [God's] name.” And in the letter of James, the writer exhorts us to “rid [ourselves] of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the **implanted word** that has the power to save [our] souls.”

These are such wonderful images. I love the thought of God grafting the love for God's name in my heart, and of welcoming with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save my soul.

I yearn to be rich soil for God's name, for God's love, for God's aliveness in this world.

But what about my love for being right?

“From the place where we are right/
Flowers will never grow
in the spring.//The place where we are right/
is hard and trampled/

Like a yard.”

Like a yard.

Perhaps I've walked in the yard in front of my beloved house a bit too often.

In the gospel for today we see Jesus talking with the Pharisees, having a disagreement about the "right" way to do things. The scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem have noticed that some of Jesus' disciples are eating with "defiled hands," that is, without the ritual washing that is necessary in order to remain (or to become again) pure, and holy. When they ask Jesus why it is that his disciples do not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands, Jesus senses a hypocritical stance in the question, and quotes Isaiah: "this people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching precepts as doctrines." He goes on to say to the scribes and Pharisees, "you abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition," and then in a section we did not read this morning, gives a stunning example of how some of his fellow Jews are following a tradition that allows them to neglect the commandment to honor father and mother in order to have greater material comfort for themselves (rather than supporting their parents financially). Finally, Jesus speaks once again to the crowd, explaining that nothing that comes from outside a person can defile, but rather what comes from within, from the heart. That is to say: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly.

[whew]

One way of praying with scripture is to be with the story as we would be with a dream: we can hold it as our communal dream; and, just as Jung taught us to look at dreams as revelatory of our full selves, we can see all the characters in this prayerful dream as in some way parts of ourselves.

Would you pray this way with me?

So: If we ask if the Pharisees' hearts have become hardened, trampled down like a yard from which no flowers will bloom in the spring-the question is not one that's directed outside of ourselves, scapegoating the Pharisees of long ago, but rather one that we ask of our own hearts. (Just as Jesus, too, another character in this rich, communal dream, is part of us as well.)

So: There is a place in our hearts where we *are right*, and which has become hard and unyielding, unable to accept new seeds. I wonder, and invite you to wonder with me:

...What is the deep yearning of that place in our hearts? ...

...What questions might we ask the scribes and Pharisees in ourselves? ...

...Why are these shadow characters showing up in this dream?...

...What do they have to teach us, today?

And then there is the Jesus in our dream, the Jesus of our hearts. What is his deep yearning, as part of us?...

...What does that place in our heart look like?...

...Why is he showing up in this dream?...

...What does he have to teach us, today?...

I'm imagining the Jesus-place in my heart as a softened, fertile place. A place of not-knowing, of not being sure-a place where surprise is.

Is that the Jesus place?

But look, it's actually the same place. "Doubts and loves dig up the world like a mole, a plow." The dirt has been turned over. The yard has been turned into a field. The house is gone. All that work. All that careful construction. All that solidity and certainty. Gone.

The messy closets and the basement-gone, too.

"And a whisper will be heard in the place where the ruined House once stood."

A whisper. A still, small voice where the House used to be.

Arise, my love, my fair one ...

Is this the implanted word, sending forth its seeds on the wind?