

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA W16
Easter 5 (Year C) 8:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m.
Sunday 24 April 2016

Acts 11:1-18
Ps 148
Rev 21:1-6
John 13:31-35

A New Creation

"I saw a new heaven and a new earth... And I heard a loud voice... saying, "the home of God is among mortals" (Revelation 21).

1. On this magnificent spring day, at the center of the waters of ocean and bay, surrounded by the rose gardens of Grace Cathedral, Earth Day weekend continues to unfold. This morning I want you to entertain an idea, a possibility. It's hard to simply put this into words, but it begins in the conviction that there is so much more to what is happening at this moment, right here, than we consciously realize. What if the new creation, the new heaven and new earth vividly proclaimed by John of Patmos lies immediately close at hand?

Henry David Thoreau dedicated every day of his life to watching how God appears to us in nature. In his *Journal* he writes, "We are receiving our portion of the Infinite."¹ In his book *Walden*, "Nearest to all things is that power which fashions their being. Next to us the grandest laws are continually being executed. Next to us is not the workman we have hired, with whom we love so well to talk, but the workman whose work we are."²

The American philosopher and psychologist William James describes this in different terms. In 1901 he delivered the Gifford Lectures in Scotland that later would become a book called *The Varieties of Religious Experiences*. He describes in detail mystical experiences using historical and contemporary examples. These accounts include men and women from different religions and even non-believers. They range from the ordinary to the peculiar, from the terrifying to the ecstatic.

As a young man James suffered from a debilitating illness and deep despair. In the book he anonymously includes a mystical experience that he himself had when he felt saved by something beyond himself. James does not wish to endorse one particular religion or another but he does conclude that we are connected to what he calls "the more." At certain moments in our life we become conscious of a higher part of ourselves which is, "conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of [us]."³

From his study of others and his own experience James believes that when everything goes to pieces in our life we can be saved through, "the subconscious continuation of our conscious life." There is something, someone, absolutely near to us and yet often unknown to us – the Holy One.

2. Why do we almost inevitably fail to hear this voice? The twentieth century composer John Cage (1912-1992) had a theory. He based it on the great religious thinkers and mystics who influenced him. From the Zen teacher Huang Po, Cage learned that by moving beyond our likes and dislikes we might make contact with what he called "universal mind." There is a sense in which mind creates the world we live in. Cage believed we can learn to overcome our unnecessary feeling of separation from the world.

The Christian mystic and preacher Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) also had a huge effect on Cage. Eckhart thought the idea of our self that comes from our senses is not at all like our real soul. He writes, "Consequently there is nothing so unknown to the soul as herself."⁴ If we hardly know our self, what chance do we have to know God?

Above all Eckhart believed in the mystery of God. We draw closest to that mystery not by trying to describe the positive attributes of God but by meditating on what God is not. We see the true God not by dwelling on the needs of our self but in the world beyond us.

According to John Cage part of the problem is that modern people, and especially artists, think that happiness and truth come from self-expression. In contrast to this Cage asserts that the stories in our heads, the tapes we play in our brains to understand what is happening – these are precisely the problem.

Cage admired Henry David Thoreau, that he, "got up each morning and walked to the woods as though he had never been where he was going to, so that whatever was there came to him like liquid into an empty glass. Many people taking such a walk would have their heads so full of other ideas that it would be a long time before they were capable of hearing or seeing. Most people are blinded by themselves."⁶

Around the age of forty researchers at Harvard University invited Cage to try their anechoic chamber, a room so thoroughly insulated that it was probably the quietest place on earth. Cage looked forward to experiencing complete silence. However, in the room he noticed two different kinds of sound. Afterward the technician explained that the high pitched whine was the sound of his firing neurons and the dull roar was the blood coursing through his body.

This realization that there is no such thing as silence came as a spiritual revelation to him. In 1952, inspired by this experience, he composed the controversial 4'33" a piece performed by expert musicians who make no deliberate sounds on their instruments. Many ridiculed him. At performances they could hear nothing but their own egos. But a few experienced a kind of opening into a deeper level of experience, a new appreciation of holiness in everyday sounds.

The piece had this effect on Cage himself. Three years before his death he told an interviewer, "No day goes by without making use of that piece in my life and in my work. I listen to it every day... I don't sit down to do it; I turn my attention toward it... More than anything else, it's the source of my enjoyment of life."⁷

3. For Cage, hunger for self-expression, our inner narratives, the ego prevent us from fully experiencing what matters most. So how do you peel back the ego to hear the beautiful sounds where others perceive only silence or themselves? The poet and potter M.C. Richards (1916-1999) was among the remarkable number of modern artists who John Cage counted as friends. You can see some of her works by the south wall as part of the Stations of the Cosmic Christ.

Richards believed in what she calls "centering." She writes, "the deeper we go... the more contact we make with another's reality... I claim that the center holds us all and as we

speak out of it, we speak in a common voice.”⁸ For her what is real, what makes it possible for us to experience the beauty that surrounds us comes from that deep place where we meet each other.

According to M.C. Richards education is the process of waking up to this shared Self. Rather than projecting our consciousness onto the world we can learn to take the world into ourselves. In her book *Centering in Poetry, Pottery and the Person* Richards writes, “Joy is different than happiness... I am talking about joy. How, when the mind stops its circling, we say YES, YES to what we behold.”⁹

This connection to each other in our center lies at the heart of Jesus’ life and teaching. It exists above any commitment to nation or family or ideal. Jesus says, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (Jn. 13). My experiences over the last two weeks have shown me just how new this commandment is.

Last Saturday our family went on a Duck Tour in Boston Massachusetts. With the tourists we rode in an amphibious vehicle over the streets of Boston and the waves of the Charles River. Before long it seemed more like a journey in an “ambiguous vehicle.”

For the first time since childhood I heard all the stories of the Revolutionary War. But this time, rather than being struck by the inevitability of the conflict (or the righteousness of the cause), I felt an overwhelming sadness. One third of the colonists were loyal to the crown, one third wanted to try a new experiment in government and another third couldn’t decide. Imagine the kind of tensions in that society.

Listening again to the founding myths of our country filled me with a sense of tragedy. I felt sorry that the colonists could not have more of a role in governing themselves, for the people killed and those who did the killing in the Boston Massacre, that Britain attempted to quell dissent through a massive occupation. It seemed horrifying that there were a thousand British casualties and five hundred American casualties at the Battle of Bunker Hill (Breed’s Hill). I almost wanted to weep at the Old North Bridge memorial marker for the British soldiers who died so far away from home.

Patrick Henry’s slogan “Give me liberty or give me death” began to sound a lot more like “I’ll die for my political beliefs but I’ll also kill because of them.” I began to wonder if life here is so different from Canada that it justifies the death of so many young men. I love this country very much but I love it for the good we create together not for what we have lost. Last night at the “Ireland’s Poet-Patriots” event I felt a similar feeling.¹⁰

The old way tells us that we have to harden our hearts against human feeling. But in the new creation, which keeps challenging us in different ways, love comes first. At every moment in minor decisions and major ones, we can choose to perpetuate the cycle of tragedy and loss or we can rise with Jesus to new life in forgiveness.

I began with an idea – that “nearest to all things” lies our creator, the one William James describes as, “the more,” that unconscious connection between us and a higher life. We fail to see and hear this holy one because ego has made our soul unknown to itself. We

have constructed a kind of anechoic chamber of the heart that makes us deaf not only to the existence of our beautiful source but to the needs of others.

According to John Cage we can be transformed by the ordinary. His friend M.C. Richards shows that we have great reason for hope. The closer we draw to the center, the more we see the common ground that we share. We will not always be perfect, but we can all return to the love at our heart.

I pray that we will be able to carry this idea with us as we leave this place and that it will transform our vision and our life. Let me conclude with Bishop Marc Andrus' favorite quote from Richards. "Within us lives a merciful being who helps us to our feet however many times we fall."¹¹ "I give you a new commandment that you love one another." "I saw a new heaven and a new earth."

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Journal* ed. John C. Broderick and Robert Sattelmeyer, Vol. 4 (Princeton NJ: University Press, 1981-), 52-54. and "Economy" in *Walden*.

² Henry David Thoreau, *The Illustrated Walden* (Princeton, NJ: 1973), 134.

³ William James *The Variety of Religious Experiences in Writings: 1902-1910* (NY: The Library of America, 1987), 454, 458.

⁴ Kay Larson, *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism and the Inner Life of Artists* (NY: Penguin Books, 2013), 129.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xviii.

⁸ Mary Caroline Richards, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1962), 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 13, 15.

¹⁰ Pádraig Pearse (1879-1916) one of the men cruelly executed after the Easter Uprising in Dublin, Ireland on May 3, 1916 put it so well in his poem. "I blinded my eyes... I closed my ears... I hardened my heart... and turned my face to the deed that I see and the death that I die." Pádraig Pearse, "Renunciation." The poet probably did not intend it, but devotion to a nation can mean no longer seeing the humanity of another person, closing one's ears to the needs of another and hardening one's heart to human kindness.

¹¹ Mary Caroline Richards, *Centering in Pottery, Poetry, and the Person* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1962).