

SERMON
August 18, 2024, First Presbyterian Church, Marshfield
Title: "Rolling in the Deep" Dan Crump

I'm going to begin this morning by quoting myself from a sermon I offered this past January 21st.

"There are two parts to you. There is the you I think I know, and the one I can never even hope to. The first can, and perhaps could, if I have earned your trust, become more complete; the second, always already complete, is filled with an infinity of surprises, an inexhaustible reservoir of unspoken truth yet to be revealed."

Though I didn't mention it at the time, those words emerged out of my grief following mom's passing last June. It seemed the memories of sixty-six years should be enough to continue mom's presence through however many more years I might have without her, but quite suddenly, I realized my memories were more about me than her. The stories shared at her memorial rang as hollow as anything I have ever heard. The pictures were just pictures, like the ones that come with a store-bought frame. Excepting the fading memories I was trying desperately to hold onto, that words and pictures seemed to assault more than bolster, I was left holding nothing.

In February, I attended a Zen retreat with my wife, Kamie, a few weeks after that sermon. In Zen, you spend a lot of time and energy, maybe all you have, looking at nothing, "being" something "being" nothing. A great deal of space opens up between being something and being nothing, and you realize you are both a pile of joys and sorrows, victories and defeats, questions and answers, stories and pictures, and at the same time, but on a far deeper, truer level, none of these. As the deepest, truest part of myself, I realized the deepest part of her is every bit as true and present as the deepest part of me is, and always would be. Somehow her nothing and my nothing became all there is, and let me tell you, that is really something!

So, if you will let me, I'd like to spend the next few moments with you putting some space between the waves and the ocean, starting "in the beginning." Our translation says that when God began, the earth was a formless void. The deep was there. The surface was there. God was there. God's creative action began as wind which brought the waves out of the deep, and then God spoke the ability to see it - into being. Of course, this is not and never was a scientific treatise on how things came to be, but rather a love story between a formless void and God's capacity to call creative polarities out of it, wave and deep, light and darkness, water and land, life and lifelessness, so-called male and female energies. The Holy Scripture teaches that opposites are the very fabric of creation. Look carefully at Genesis One. God calls for the separation of light and darkness, but, against our wishes perhaps, God leaves the darkness in place and in fact gives it its own name! Darkness is just as much a part of creation as we are.

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In spite of our preference for knowledge over not knowing, light over dark, power over powerlessness, us over them, Christian history has not succeeded in collapsing these creative polarities in favor of our preferences. Theologian Matthew Fox describes the walk of faith as a four-fold path, beginning with the *via positiva*, and the *via negativa*. The positive path is lined with beauty and wonder, sweetness and light, blessing, abundance, certitude, trust, life seemingly everlasting. The negative path passes through darker terrain, doubt, pain, separation, letting go, crucifixion, and death. These two opposing paths meet in the *via creativa* - where death only makes life more precious, - doubt deepens rather than destroys faith - and beauty embraces the beastly. The *via creativa* opens up into the *via transformativa* after which the path does not change as much as the one who walks it. Objects and events still appear just as before but everything shines with God's never-ending holy love. Suddenly Paul's instruction, "give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus," is possible.

Various theologies can be divided between the cataphatic and the apophatic. Don't worry about the names, focus on what they are naming. The cataphatic seeks to assign to God affirmations and adjectives such as good, loving, gracious, judgmental, jealous, and perhaps the most historically problematic, male. Cataphatic theologies imply that God exists in some sense like we do, either limited or not limited but in relation to time and space. Apophatic or negative theologies, on the other hand, stress that nothing can be said about God which does not limit God. God is absolute other and cannot be known or understood or expressed in symbolic terms. Some go as far as to say God cannot even be said to exist in relation to time and space as we do.

These polarities - light and dark, the positive and the negative, the named and the unnameable - are in a constant mutual dance. When we call times good and events happy, the light only confirms what we think we know, that all is well, God is good, life is beautiful, and what is shrouded in the dark can safely be ignored. When times get tough, the light is far less friendly than the dark is, as what we thought we knew goes up in smoke, and God becomes a question if God is anything at all. Another polarity emerges, the conditioned and the unconditional, or as they say in Zen, the relative and the absolute.

20th century theologian, Paul Tillich, characterizes God as the unconditioned, not a being existing as such, but the Ground of Being out of which being is brought forth and eventually returns. God, for Tillich, is the deepest depth of every being. However, existence is conditional, fixed in time and space, defined by joys and sorrows, but ultimately, for the human ever conscious of its unconditional ground, dependent upon meaning. And meaning is dependent upon an ultimate concern. Quoting Tillich,

"The ultimate concern is unconditional, independent of any conditions of character, desire, or circumstance. The unconditional concern is total: no part of ourselves or of our world is excluded from it; there is no "place" to flee from it. The total concern is infinite:

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no moment of relaxation and rest is possible in the face of a religious concern which is ultimate, unconditional, total, and infinite."

Paul Tillich was a fascinating figure in the years following WWII. He was a chaplain in World War One, was hospitalized three times for combat trauma, and was awarded the Iron Cross for bravery under fire. He was among the first non-Jewish professors to be expelled from German academia by the Nazis. He completely changed his thinking language from German to English upon moving to the US at the age of 47. He became theology's equivalent to Albert Einstein in popular culture, an intellectual celebrity (whatever became of those?). Major popular magazines featured his very heady essays in between articles on Brigitte Bardot and Ty Cobb, between ads for deodorant and motor oil. Friend of the church, Brian Ewert, told me he had an aunt, probably in the throes of dementia, who camped out on Tillich's lawn in Chicago. Her enthrallment was allayed only by a restraining order.

The question of the meaning of life haunted post-world war America. Consumerism, nationalism, fundamentalism, humanism and an apparent religious fervor all tried to replace what two world wars and a growing cold war had taken away, a sense that life had any meaning at all. In the most read, most popular magazines of the day, Tillich chided both Billy Graham's, quote, "propagandistic methods and primitive theological fundamentalism," and Norman Vincent Peale's shallow "bandaid" of positive thinking as not getting to the depth, as not even taking the issue of meaninglessness seriously. For Tillich, only an unconditioned ground of being and a radically incontestable meaning of meaning could convert the bottomless abyss of meaninglessness into a life-sustaining well.

Quoting Tillich again, "Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life." "[Ultimate concern] is the object of total surrender, demanding also the surrender of our subjectivity while we look at it. It is a matter of infinite passion and interest, making us its object whenever we try to make it our object." "Ultimate concern is the . . . translation of the greatest commandment, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'"

But Tillich fully acknowledges, in fact, knows as well as anyone, the danger of surrender to anything other than the absolutely unconditioned. His German homeland, and many other homelands with it, was devastated by exactly that as all but just a few hold-outs among the German Christian Church fully backed the Nazi regime with their own supposed divine authority, and he reserves the strongest language in the Christian lexicon for "the elevation of something conditional to unconditional significance." He calls it "the demonic." Whenever we surrender ultimately to that which is not ultimate, we create, in Tillich's terms, a demon. The more completely we surrender - the more of our own power of being we surrender - the stronger and

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more potentially destructive the demon becomes. In addition to everything Pastor Laurie said last week in her excellent sermon "What About Evil," I would suggest in hopeful agreement with Paul Tillich, that evil personified is none other than our own conditional concern elevated to infinite importance. Evil experienced, aka, suffering, is nothing but our conditional concerns proving to be exactly that: conditional.

I can imagine that Paul Tillich draws these conclusions from the words of another Paul, the one who brings us our second scripture. The Areopagus was littered with statues dedicated to all the gods of this and that, every one as particular, situational, and conditional as can be. The unknown god was meant to be a somewhat dismissive catchall, "in case we missed one," but Paul turned it around to say that the god that cannot be known is the only one that matters. Our translation said "deity," but the Greek original is *theos* connected to a root meaning to supplicate or implore, the one to take your concerns to, the one to determine whether the concern is ultimate or not.

We here at FPC wear our heart on our sleeve. We are fine-tuned to the suffering in our community and beyond, and when we see it we go all in as if our own lives depended upon a solution. How can we know that our concern is ultimate? That it deserves the full surrender of our heart, soul, mind, and strength? The short answer is that we can't, until it blows up in our face and we end up hurting more than helping. But we can also ask, is there any opposition to our efforts? Does it come from good people acting in good faith? Can our plan go forward only if our side wins the vote. If so, it might be what Tillich calls a preliminary concern. Can opposition in bad faith make things needlessly worse than they already are? Might be conditional. Martin Luther King Jr, a rapt student of Tillich's, knew that the challenges the Black community faced were conditional. Literally, the conditions sucked! He recognized that the economic and political changes he marched for were preliminary concerns. The ultimate concern was the end of violence, so he sought to take each and every step toward that ultimate goal.

Paul Tillich offers another way to determine the ultimacy of our concerns. In those moments when we are free to not care what happens next, we can silence the preliminary concerns, no matter how interesting, and valuable, and important they may be, (they are concerns after all!) and perhaps hear the voice of ultimate concern calling from our deepest self. In times when evil is all around, we can pause in the midst of the devastation and perhaps see the conditioned concern that was given unconditional significance, and in that moment turn to face the unknown God.

I have one more. In those times that a loved one leaves us, can we see that the deepest part of them, that eternal mystery that they were all along, is the deepest part of us, too? The waves rise and fall, and the deep is always already here.