

SERMON  
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson  
September 15, 2019

**Luke 15:1-10**

*All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

***Spirit, Be Our Spirit***

*Spirit, be our spirit in this time of searching for new life. Open inner spaces with the fullness of your love. Spirit, let us now be and forever transformed for all humanity. Movement of your presence heals and deepens our hope to freely live. Gift of heart where truth springs from the goodness that you've sown. Spirit, let us now be and forever transformed for all humanity. Into desert silence there to listen and be with open heart, you shall lead us, thirsting; and we turn from our fears: forgiving love. Spirit, let us now be and forever transformed for all humanity.*

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I keep a picture on my bookcase, right near my desk—a photograph I took of my son on a beach at Kiawah Island, South Carolina when he was about five years old. He's there with my mother, who is showing him something in her hand—a shell she found on the beach. When I look at the photograph, I can almost hear the profound silence between them and can see his natural curiosity. I refer to this picture as our *Rachel Carson Moment*. You probably remember her: Rachel Carson was an American marine biologist, author, and conservationist whose book, *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, is credited with advancing the *global environmental movement*. In another remarkable book, *The Sense of Wonder*, she wrote:

*If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder,  
he needs the companionship of at least one adult  
who can share it, rediscovering with him  
the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in.*

*A sense of wonder.*

Today is the first day of our program year when we start up another year of Bible study, a Reading Group, and *Godly Play*. My best guess is that we have been offering *Godly Play*, which is a particular method of Christian education for children, for close to thirty years. *Godly Play* is

not so much a program as it is a method, designed by Jerome Berryman who studied under Sophia Cavelletti, who was a disciple of Marie Montessorri. It's a method that honors and encourages a child's inborn sense of wonder. It assumes that children already know a lot about the mystery of God but that they need language and stories to help them talk about their experiences. In a nutshell, the purpose or goal of *Godly Play* is to help children "enjoy God." Isn't that a magnificent goal! The difference this year, is that for the first time we have a dedicated space —a sacred space—in the Conboy Center—where the sacred stories of our faith can have a home and where children can discover the *joy, excitement, and mystery of God* and be welcomed *just as they are*. We are not trying to fill their heads with information but to welcome them into a special place with adults who are their companions. It's a wonderful way to share our faith with our children. It's not the only way, but I believe it is the best we have to offer because it is respectful and honors each child.

Religion means many things to different people. Some people define their religion as a belief upon which they pin their hopes and their understanding of life. For these, religion could be defined as a *unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things* (Thomas Moore, *The Re-enchantment of Everyday Life*, 1997). But there isn't much room for faith in a religion that is reduced to a belief, and there isn't much room for experience, and especially for open-minded conversations and participation with the experience of the Sacred. A religion reduced to a belief, even though it may have concern for morality and social action, by definition, separates itself from everyday life, from others, and becomes obsessed with its own brand of belief—with its own moral purity, to the exclusion of other experiences and perspectives. In other words, it adheres to ideas of rightness—"This is what **I** believe"—but this has little to do with the world in which we all live. Little recognition that there is a conversation about God and faith that has been going on for 8,000 years or more. We might say that religion is a conversation. The mystery of God and the sacredness of creation is something so much bigger and so much more wonderful than any of us can fully imagine by ourselves, much less master. On the other hand, when we define religion as developing a *sense of wonder, of honoring the sacredness of ordinary life, of recognizing the holy in every aspect of life*—nature, work, home, business and public affairs—this kind of religion is as natural to every human being as much as barking is to a dog!

To be religious in this way, is to be human. Here's an old favorite quote, I don't know who first said it:

*Perhaps Christianity has more to do  
with being redemptively human  
than being superhumanly spiritual.  
It involves conversion  
not from human being to spiritual hero,  
but from inhuman to human.  
God will be known  
in and through our humanity.*

Religion, as an appreciation, an acknowledgement, an awareness of the sacred and holy in every aspect of life not only changes us, but enlivens us, shapes us, and connects us to God and to each other. As the monks of Weston Priory pray:

*Open inner spaces with the fullness of your love.  
Spirit, let us now be and forever transformed for all humanity.*

No wonder Jesus and the Pharisees and scribes didn't get along. They didn't understand one another. For the Pharisees and scribes religion was a judgement that was already determined. Jesus' openness and actions caused them to grumble.

*They were grumbling and saying, "This fellow  
welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

Isn't this a peculiar word in today's Gospel! They were grumbling! They shares an emotional discontent with Jesus' openness, his acceptance, his unconditional hospitality and welcome to people of all kinds. But, in spite of their grumbling, Jesus tells them about the joy of finding what is lost! This is what God is like he says. God rejoices when we are found. The stories he

tells are not just about sheep and coins but about people! About witnessing *metamorphosis* in people's lives—that's the word he uses. Repentance in Greek is the word *metamorphosis*, profound and dramatic change—like the forming of a butterfly from a caterpillar. Who would grumble at such an event? Who doesn't rejoice? *God really is not done with us yet!*

I wonder what sort of religious household are you looking for? Like natural religion, there is an inborn need for a welcoming home that lies deep in the human heart. The tax collectors and sinners came to Jesus looking for such a home. Jesus calls it, "the Kingdom of God."

My son right now is without a home. He and his wife sold their house but have not been able to find what it is they are looking for—for themselves and their two young children. They have moved in with his in-laws. We'll see how that goes! They have a realtor. And I send them listings. But he says,

"It's too small." "It's not for us." "It's on a double-yellow."

Do you know what a double-yellow is? It's the yellow lines painted on the street. It means that the street in front of the house has too much traffic.

"It's too expensive." "The taxes are too high." "The schools aren't good enough."

I don't know what they are going to do. Few things are more important than finding a home and working at it constantly to make it resonate with deep memories and fulfill deep longings. The soul's need for a home has to do not only with shelter and a house but with more subtle things—like the feeling that one is living in the right place, being around people who offer a sense of belonging, respect the same values, encourage growth and wellbeing, and a feeling of being protected and secure. Recently, I discovered that the word "Ecology" is made up of two important Greek words. The first part, *Eco* is a form of the Greek word that means, guess what—"home." We often use the word *ecology* to mean "the science of the earth." At its core, it is more than this. As Rachel Carson brought to our attention —*Ecology* has sacred roots. It embraces

our emotional search for a home and includes the spiritual need of finding home for the soul. The other part of the word points to another mystery. *Logos* does not just mean the study of something. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is named “*Logos*.”

*In the beginning was the Word (logos)  
and the Word was with God  
and the Word was God.*

“*Logos*” is so full of mystery that it is used to denote divinity itself. Connect these two words and we learn—

*we are always seeking to make a home for the heart  
and always looking for the house of divinity—of God.*

As we grow older many places in the world may become part of our personal *ecology*. and we may begin to realize that the whole planet is in a real sense, our home.

*The earth is filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea!*  
Habakkuk 2:14

Searching for and finding a home is an act of *natural religion*. It goes hand-in-hand with developing a sense of wonder, of honoring the sacredness of ordinary life, of recognizing the holy in every aspect of life—and of welcoming all people into the experience and the conversation.

Welcome home, Epiphany. May we be for each other a welcoming, honoring, respectful home. A place where rightness is not about being right, but about being in right relationship with God, each other, ourselves—a place where we wonder and marvel and receive the love of God in Jesus Christ whose life holds the mystery and power of redemption and transformation—nothing less

than *metamorphosis*. May we be grateful, joyful creatures — living alongside and respectful of all God's creatures. May we be more ready to wonder than to control, with open hearts. May we be more ready to rejoice than to grumble. Welcoming all into God's home. God's kingdom. God's people. God's companions. Sharing and discovering the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in.

Amen.