

**The Good Shepherdess-of-All**  
**Sunday, August 8, 2021, 11:15 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena**  
**The Rev. Dr. Sally Howard**

*Silence my soul,  
these trees are prayers.  
I asked the tree, "Tell me about God";  
then it blossomed.  
Rabindranath Tagore*

Hello, All Saints! It's good to be home after a long trip with my family to my husband's family's summerhouse. One thing I love to do on vacation is to read whatever happens to cross my path—whatever I feel drawn to, *without* a specific purpose or task connected to it. I am often surprised by how much these books speak to me, sometimes even cohere, and the voices of their authors expand my my mind and heart. It can be bring me such joy! This summer was no exception as I read a book suggested by my daughter, called "Braiding Sweet Grass", by Robin Walls Kimmerer.

Dr. Kimmerer is a botanist who has long felt a passion to write about the interface of botany and the stories she grew up with as a member of the Potawatomi tribe. I was deeply moved by her depiction of scientific training that pressured her to accept a story of a disenchanted universe In which there is no spirit, in which things can be separated and measured apart from each other. It was wondrous to learn from her that breathing in the scent of the humus of the earth stimulates the release of the hormone oxytocin, the same chemical that promotes bonding between mother and child, and between lovers. The smell of soil creates bonding with the earth! Isn't that amazing? Dr. Kimmerer succeeded in retaining her native stories and also discovered the science of connection and interdependence.

But most compelling was her description of the creation stories of her world, as opposed to mine. Hers was the story of Skywoman, who co-created a garden of abundance for nurturing the well-being of all; a world of mutuality and gratitude. In this story everything is gift, to be received, enjoyed, and met with reciprocity. Mine was also a story of a woman and a garden, but the woman was banished for her sensual nature, cast out to wander in a hostile wilderness of toil and scarcity.

My story of separation and punishment, and the conflict with and dominance over the earth and her creatures, has wreaked untold damage to the world, including to indigenous peoples. Still, Dr. Kimmerer is a woman of hope, and she suggests we consider what our world could be, if we knew that our deepest story is one of abundance, mutuality and the reciprocity of all that exists! If we were to convert from a market to a gift economy, from private goods to common wealth. Botany tells that story again and again in the intricate interdependencies of flourishing, and give and take, of cycles of life, death, and regeneration. In the forest, the word "alone", has no meaning.

Einstein once said that the most important decision we make is whether we believe we live in a friendly or hostile universe. That is why I love our lectionary readings today, because they tell us that our deepest story, the deepest story of all creation is one of generosity, friendship, and abundance. All is gift! All is grace! God is outpouring Love, creating a spirit infused world with harmonies and rhythms of sea and sky, and reciprocity between the more than just human world of earth, plants and creatures.

In this passage, Jesus tells us he is the Good Shepherd, not because he is the Christ, but because he is connected to God the Shepherdess-of-all, who knows and loves him with mutuality, reciprocity and respect. Jesus is the Good Shepherd because he cares for the sheep, binding their wounds, seeking them out when they are lost, protecting them from harm, even at cost to himself. It is the story of deep bonding love from which nothing can separate us, not even ourselves, not even death. The Good Shepherd calls us by name, to know and be known, to love as freely as we are loved.

But in our world and in our own lives that can be hard to believe. Sometimes in my life, there is so much noise and contrary voices that all but drown out the voice of my Shepherd. I take cover, I close off, and can feel the grip of the fear that I am not enough and may not have what I or my family needs. I can feel discouraged and impatient with the sometimes slow work of God and Her team, in the face of the suffering in our world.

Let's stay real, the pandemic is not behind us, racism and sexism aren't either. The inequities of wealth distribution emergent from economies of scarcity are growing ever more extreme. Our earth is on fire and we are so polarized and desperate that we can't even talk about how to get it together to save our own lives, and those of our children and grandchildren. We can be deaf to the harmonies of the universe, resistant to asking ourselves what it means that our beautiful building lies on stolen land; that our windows depict only whiteness; and our notions of private property, by definition, exclude others from sharing.

It's hard for us to tell our whole stories, so that we can heal individually and collectively, and rid ourselves of a scarcity mindset that leads us to think that we have to hang onto what we've got. Add to that, that our human minds can't even begin to get around the concept of a limitless anything, let alone the inexhaustible abundance of God. It's enough to give even the wisest prophet a big fat headache.

Richard Rohr once said that Jesus was a great psychologist. Now I don't know if that is a term that I would use, but Jesus was filled with the Sophia Wisdom of God and knew our human experience from the inside out. He knew our fears and this tendency to drift into fear and a scarcity mindset. He experienced personally the horrific morphing of human fears and resistance to interdependency, into forms of greed, callousness, and brutal oppression.

And as the compassionate One, he also understood that we really can't move beyond our fears unless we are securely loved. We are only able to love because we are loved first.

So knowing the hairs on our heads, Her voice calls us by name inviting us to into the abundance of God's love, that our joy may be made complete. In the midst of our lives we need to breathe in the scent of the earth to remember things we didn't even know we've forgotten.

We need to tell our whole stories and listen to the stories and voices of others, so that our healing and joy may be made complete. Love is more powerful than fear and our God will make a way where there is none—across polarization, fear and hate, dishonesty and exploitation.

One of the things I love about the rustic summerhouse where we stay is the quiet. There is no electricity but the summer light lingers long into the evening, so that the changing colors of the sky and water become our evening show. We sit outside surrounded by the sounds of wind and sea, and hear countless birds calling to each other. In that quiet, I gain a spaciousness not always accessible in my busy life at home. Breathing in and breathing out, I begin to remember things I didn't even know I'd forgotten.

Love, community and insistence on doing what's right, matters. Because it does.

Because it always has *and our world is in peril*.

Love is more powerful than fear. Bank on it.

Each of us was created of love and each of us was created for it.

This is our story!

Breathe in the Spirit that delights in your being and the being of all that exists, and then exhale that same breath into the world, *and see what blossoms*.

Amen