

Malcolm Clemens Young
Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA 2A20
2 Pentecost (Proper 6A) 11:00 a.m. Online Eucharist
Sunday 14 June 2020
23)

Genesis 18:1-15, (21:1-7)
Psalm 116:1, 10-17
Romans 5:1-8
Matthew 9:35-10:8, (9-23)

Too Wonderful

"Is anything too wonderful for the Lord" (Gen. 18)?

God made you. In this vast expanding universe, in all time, you are utterly unique. So how do you understand the mysterious, unfolding creation that is you? What are you capable of?

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) compares our existence to waking up and finding ourselves on a vast staircase that goes upward and out of sight. We don't know where we came from or where we are going. Two years before he had lost his five year old son and he reflects that even when we lose the ones who are most dear to us somehow we continue on, as "Ghostlike we glide through nature..."¹

These days we have become less sure of where we stand. Originally we talked about COVID19 as if it were a short-term blizzard that we had to get through before things returned to normal. Now we wonder about the long winter ahead of us. Some worry that it might even be an ice age. In a heartbreaking moment an older friend asked me if I thought she would ever be able to come to Grace Cathedral again.

Since George Floyd's crucifixion by a Minneapolis police officer we have continued a conversation that has been going on since the country first started. The question is easy to articulate: will this nation ever treat all citizens with equal dignity.

God sees our dreams and remembers them. After watching the movie *Selma* (2014) I've been dreaming about the young girls descending down the stairs of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in the instants before a white supremacist's bomb killed them. I see the protesters being savagely beaten on Pettus bridge, mixed with images from today's news.²

Friday was the 57th anniversary of Medgar Evers' (1925-1963) murder. He said, "I love my children and I love my wife with all my heart. And I would die, die gladly, if that would make a better life for them."³ That day was also the 53rd anniversary of the Supreme Court decision that struck down state bans on interracial marriages. Mildred and Richard Loving lived in Caroline County, Virginia. They were arrested in the middle of the night.

They were imprisoned for unlawful cohabitation and given the choice of leaving the state for twenty-five years or serving jail time.

This week two of the men in our Monday night Bible Study talked about having had police hold guns to their heads, about being thrown into the back of squad cars, about family and friends who had lost their lives. At the end of that conversation one of them said, "Expect people not to change, no matter what the consequences are."⁴

What is the nature of our existence? Is it possible to change? What are we capable of? This morning I want to talk about two answers to these questions, two ways of looking at the world.

1. The first comes from the nineteenth century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860).⁵ Schopenhauer slept with a loaded pistol next to his bed. He took excessive precautions against disease. He talked about feeling uncomfortable when nothing alarmed him (because there must, "still be something of which I am ignorant for a time"). We remember him for believing in biological evolution before Charles Darwin, for his love of music and his pessimism.

At age 17 Schopenhauer hated his work as a clerk in the family business. But then his father took his own life and he inherited a large fortune. He dedicated himself completely to philosophy and at age 28 he published a book called *The World as Will and Idea*. Schopenhauer thought it deserved immortal fame and he spent his whole lifetime promoting it.

After tremendous advances in physics that led scientists like Isaac Newton (1642-1726) to be able to predict the motion of physical objects, philosophers like Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) worried that people might start to believe that humans were just determined by outside forces like billiard balls on a pool table. In contrast Kant asserted that while outside forces have a tremendous effect on us, it is possible to genuinely act freely, even against our own interest for the sake of a higher good.

Kant explained all this by distinguishing how: a. the world is in itself, from, b. how we perceive it through our senses and understanding. Schopenhauer extended this scheme. He believed that Kant was wrong to think that the world is a collection of separate objects. For Schopenhauer the thing itself, the primary reality behind everything is the will to live and dominate. We find this in every creature. There is no escape from this universal war of all against all. We are not mainly physical beings or rational beings – we are primarily will, each looking out for number one.

I most admire Schopenhauer for his acute sensitivity to suffering wherever he saw it in human beings and animals. He writes, "the world is Hell, and men are on the one hand the tormented souls and on the other the devils in it." "As a reliable compass for orienting yourself in life nothing is more useful than to accustom yourself to regarding the world as a... sort of penal colony (prison)... each of us is being punished for his existence in his own particular way."⁶ On the basis of his conviction that people are merely egotistical and cruel, Schopenhauer found no comfort in this underlying power that animates all life.

2. But there is another understanding of the world. The way of Jesus. The way of love. Today we embark on an a six month journey of Sunday readings through the Gospel of Matthew. It all begins with Jesus seeing the crowds. These are not the good people or the holy ones, they are what we call "the public." And he has profound compassion for all of them. The Greek word (splanxnon) means that from the very deepest part of himself he loved them in a visceral way. He wants to take away their pain.⁷

Jesus looks at this suffering world of isolation, brutality, arbitrary hatred, and he sees the opportunity for a harvest of goodness. We were made to do ministry. We were designed and created to love, to do good work to make the world better.

"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Mt. 9). The list of followers includes Peter and Judas who each betrayed Jesus. It includes Matthew the Tax Collector, a despised profession that involved collaborating with the occupying Roman army. It would be like listing your friends and saying, "Malcolm the arms dealer."

Jesus sends out his friends to the suffering world, to our suffering world, to people of all nations (Mt. 18:19). Jesus says to them, "Preach the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near'" (Mt. 10).

This week our online forum guest was the New Testament professor Herman Waetjen.⁸ He amazes me by boiling the entire Bible down to one simple idea. At birth we are at one with God and the world, but pretty much from that moment we begin to be indoctrinated into what he calls "the moral order of separation." This is a world of dualisms: us versus them, liberal vs. conservative, mind vs. matter, culture vs. nature, identity vs. difference, subjective vs. objective. We are taught to define ourselves in opposition to an "other."

Herman believes that when we are interpreting the Bible correctly, it moves us into what he calls "the moral order of integration" in which our differences between become far

less important than what we share. For Herman faith is not belief, as if our work was evaluating the intellectual viability of ideas. Instead faith is trust, trust in God.

Making disciples of the world is not about recruiting people for a club. It means building a world based on the principle of love, for everyone without exception. I have particularly on my mind and in my prayer our trans siblings whose civil rights and physical safety are particularly threatened right now, and for people of color, those without a safe place to live.

Quoting Paul, Herman says, "the first man, Adam became a living being; the last Adam becomes a life-giving spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45). Through Christ we become life-giving spirits. According to Jonathan Sachs who used to be chief rabbi of Great Britain, the Hebrew Bible has only one commandment to love one's neighbor and 36 commands to love the stranger.⁹

Listening to me you may think that Schopenhauer was right, that we should address each other as fellow prisoners and keep our heads down for our own safety. In the face of racism, violence and cruelty you may think that forces of the world are merely indifferent surges of power. And you may be right.

When heavenly messengers visited Abraham and Sarah and told the ninety year old woman that she was going to have a son she laughed. In response the angels said, "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord" (Gen. 18)? This morning I ask you the same thing. Is anything too wonderful for the Lord.

We don't know where we came from or where we are going. But see the reality of love at the heart of everything. Feel the compassion of Jesus for the crowds. Step into the oneness of God. Be a life-giving spirit. Let the world be your great harvest.

God made you. In this vast expanding universe, in all time, you are utterly unique.

Photographs:

Medgar Evers (Jami Floyd Instagram)

Mildred and Richard Loving (MCY FB)

Selma March

Arthur Schopenhauer?

Herman Waetjen?

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* ed. Stephen E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957) 254-5.

2 After watching *Just Mercy* (2019) I've also been dreaming about voter suppression, police stops, false convictions and Southern prison.

3 <https://www.instagram.com/jamifloyd/>

4 Bible Study 8 June 2020.

5 4 Pent (6-16-02) 6A.

6 In fact, we should greet each other saying, "Hail fellow prisoner." Arthur Schopenhauer, "On the Suffering of the World," in *Essays and Aphorisms* Tr. R. J. Hollingdale, (NY: Penguin, 1970).

7 "He saw the oxloi, man in the mass, the multitude, the crowd, the "public," "everyman"... He stood with them in an almost imperceptible but strong unity and solidarity: strong because it was grounded in his compassion, in the fact that His only desire for them was to take from them their misery and to take it on Himself." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV:2 The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, tr. G.W. Bromiley (NY: T&T Clark, 2004) 185.

8 Herman Waetjen Professor Emeritus at San Francisco Theological Seminary. "Grace Forum Online with Dr. Herman Waetjen: Re-Ordering the World," Grace Cathedral 10 June 2020.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=5l0jjTsMn6g&feature=emb_logo

9 Barbara Brown Taylor, "Guest Appearance: The Grace of Being the Stranger," *The Christian Century*, 20 September 2005. https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2005-09/guest-appearance?code=dJZhlpIzuDzKitFKBZ6Z&utm_campaign=2507a3adab-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2018_09_11_08_32_COPY_08&utm_medium=email&utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-2507a3adab-86237307