Grace, Unexpected

A Sermon Preached by Pilar Millhollen for All Souls Bethlehem Church, November 18th, 2018

Readings: "A Prayer of Thanksgiving" (Attributed to the Apostle Paul); *Odes of Solomon, Book 4*, Ode 33

Princeton professor and scholar of early Christian texts Elaine Pagels recently went on NPR to talk about a new book she's written entitled "Why Religion?" The book, which attempts to get under some of life's weirdest questions, might surprise folks who may be expecting another argument about why God exists, or some other thesis extolling the virtues of religiosity. Because Pagels doesn't set out to answer such questions, but rather share her experience of unspeakable pain and coming out the other side. Her scholarship has been both celebrated and filled with critique, which based on her unusual history with loss makes a lot of sense. Coincidentally, Pagels, who became the preeminent scholar to classify the Nag Hammadi texts found in 1945 as the "Gnostic Gospels," was my first entry into the land of theological curiosity. I took out her books while I was in college studying acting, reading them all summer while I was doing "Singin' in the Rain" and "Fiddler on the Roof" at night at the Pittsburgh Civic Light Opera, and being a rather tepid church-goer at the time, I felt really charged and alive reading these lost scriptures that had been generally dismissed as heresy. What I didn't know till now was that Pagels lost her son Mark after a long illness at the age of 6 1/2, and the following year lost her husband to a mountain-climbing accident. When interviewer Terry Gross asked if she turned to religion to cope with the loss of her son and then her spouse, she answered, "At the time of mourning, I couldn't turn much to anything – I never felt anything that people call faith - all the traditions I know seemed quite remote. What I could turn to were friends; and music, and nature, and eventually, turn to the traditions that were most familiar to me." Those traditions were Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism. After becoming born again into evangelical Christianity as a teenager, she faced her first big loss when her dear friend Paul was killed in a car accident. Rather than finding solace in her church community, she found that they were more interested in whether Paul had been born again than the loss of his life and her feelings about it. When she said, "well, no, he was Jewish," and was met with stunned faces saying, "well, then he's in hell," she left the church and thought she would never return. I can't blame her.

But for those of us for whom religion hasn't been a bait and switch, or adherence to a creed, or even a way of thinking that attempts to provide answers to everything, what is it that sustains and saves us through our varied experiences of the divine? As Elaine Pagels asks, *why does religion continue to exist*? And in an age where science is well developed enough through our limited human lens, I suppose the question is valid. I believe even more so for those of us who do have faith and choose religious community as a formative aspect in our lives. Besides "looking for some fundamental way of understanding our experience," which Pagels points out science cannot always fulfill, there is the reality of love and death. If we truly wrestle with being alive, and loving, and knowing that death comes to us all, we will eventually come in contact with a source that no religion can adequately name but can, at best, give a space to so that we can experience it more fully. For some, our experience of God's presence and unbounded goodness coheres in us a hope that holds us in our darkest hours as well as our brightest joys. For others, the wonders of the natural world sustain our sense of meaning and our connection to the universe in which we exist. And still for others, a constant feeling of "not knowing" compels us into community to wrestle with the unknowns by looking into the eyes of others and in their eyes, discovering that we are all connected.

UU theologian and minister Galen Guengerich has long struggled to synthesize a cohesive articulation of what Unitarian Universalism is, at its core, really about. He has also long claimed, and rightfully so, that Unitarian Universalism is a religion of gratitude. I've thought of this often in the past few weeks, both because of my love and connection to my UU roots, and because I've found myself at opposing ends of the gratitude spectrum frequently lately. To illustrate a couple of moments: three weeks ago I had expected the waiting for a year-long ordination process to conclude after writing extensively about my faith journey and personal theology. However, I was met by a group of clergy who did not understand the language I seemed to speak nor have room for it in their theology, so my expectations of them and my own journey with this process had to very quickly be reevaluated. As disillusioned as I was in that moment, I also had to get on the subway and go to work in a Broadway show that has shaped a large part of my adult life and continues to sustain me financially and artistically. While a great part of what matters most to me felt silenced and indeed shattered when I left the council meeting, I had a responsibility to give

my part of a different piece for an audience waiting. Waiting to be transported into a story that, when told at its best, entertains but also enlightens as it becomes a mirror reflecting our collective values, successes and failures. Night after night, even when I am exhausted, I find myself returning to what can only be described as gratitude – for what happens onstage, for the generosity and care of my cast mates, but also for the gift of being allowed to share a skill that I possess. Because a part of what happens in the journey toward gratitude is an exchange between giving and receiving. When we find ourselves unable, or prevented from, bringing forth what is within us, allowing it to spread outward and affect what is beyond us, gratitude may begin to feel insincere. And though we may fight to give thanks, we can instead feel emptiness, or longing, or resentment. And rightfully so – it's a natural reaction when the divine Light that lives within each of us feels, as Jesus once said, as if it were hid under a bushel. In this context, part of what allows the space for gratitude has to do with a sense of personal agency – that we each possess something to contribute, essentially, that we each have purpose. When we can fulfill our purpose, or help others to find theirs, gratitude flows forth as a natural result. So what about the times when we cannot give anything – our possessions, our talents, our skills? What about the times when we have nothing left in our emotional well to give either? This is the toughest one for me – because it can feel like the hardest thing in the world to surrender to receiving when we feel like we've got nothing left to give. And in fact, it's something that many of us have been culturally and psychologically conditioned *not* to accept. I realized recently that I am definitely culpable in this ethic – and as a result, I'm hopelessly, wildly, persistently drawn toward religious faith. Drawn toward something that reminds us, despite the hurts, despite the mistakes, despite the horrible imperfections of living – that not only are we loved, that we deserve to be loved. No matter what. In religious terms, I guess you would call it *grace.* A thing that happens when everything you thought you knew seems broken beyond repair or the one you loved most is taken from you. It is, for me, in the juxtaposition of watching someone I love grow sicker and weaker from cancer, knowing and yet not knowing what is to come; and then Sunday comes. Sunday comes, and I meet this community, this place where loss and grief have escaped no soul, and yet, and *yet,* every week there is a life force of unquenchable hope in the pervasive goodness of the world. Sunday comes, and as our Ode of Solomon says, Generosity hastens again to overcome the illusion of annihilation.

Generosity as the essence, the manifestation of the Divine Spirit, tells us, "I will bring you out from ruin, and make you wise in the ways of Truth. Do not be corrupted, nor perish. Hear me and be saved, for I have spoken the generosity of the Lord among you. And you will be redeemed and blessed by my hand." I chose this text today because the psalmist speaks of God in the avatar of Generosity. Generosity, capital G, breaking forth through and against the avatar for evil, named Corruption. Because the spirit of God continues to break through, unexpectedly, in spite of ourselves. In spite of the moments where gratitude feels oceans away, where we cannot see or feel anything but Corruption, the life force surprises us by somehow showing up, refusing to leave, inextinguishable.

When Elaine Pagels lost her son Mark, she said she couldn't teach at the time. She and her husband had adopted two other babies that needed care, and they went to live with Trappist monks in Colorado. "Dogma wasn't a part of their tradition," she recalls; instead, "there was music, and there was meditation." And there were her two living children that had to be raised. As difficult as the task was, she found that somehow, through music, through meditation, through the daily care of being a parent though part of her parenthood had been totally decimated, something kept her going. Kept her from falling into the pit never to climb out. And years later, with such losses, she often gets asked about her faith. Her answers may surprise you: "People ask about believing in God," she says, "and you know, I think that belief is overrated…talking about religions as if they were about belief takes an image that's basically forged in Christian tradition and applies it to Judaism, applies it to Hinduism and Buddhism…and in other traditions, belief is not quite so focused on as practice." Galen Guengerich has described embodying gratitude in religious terms through two components: a discipline of gratitude, and an ethic of gratitude. He describes the discipline as the realization of our utter dependence on each other and the world around us, which streams into an ethic that informs our actions to sustain others and the creation and keep the gratitude train moving into the future. But I would argue that discipline might also be called, paradoxically, generosity. Like the Holy Spirit of our Ode, gratitude springs forth from the heart of generosity, from the light which wants to spread outward and upward from the depths of our being. Even when we least expect it. "When people ask me if I'm religious," Elaine Pagels says, "I always answer, 'yes, incorrigibly!'" Meaning not that her belief is perfect or unshakeable but rather, as she puts it, that she is

enormously susceptible to the music, the rituals, the traditions, the prayers, that religion creates for us.

That susceptibility is perhaps where grace enters most unexpectedly. At the end of her interview, Pagels reflected, “It’s very surprising to me that long after these events happened, I feel alive and well; that the children that I helped to raise are alive and well; that people can recover from things that seemed impossible to recover from. Because I’ve seen others collapse into despair. And I wanted to see if there was another alternative, a way to live with hope and joy and courage. It speaks to gratitude about how we get through things.”

Gratitude about how get through things…the good, bad, and the terribly ugly. Gratitude that shows up because of what we’re given, and it shows up despite what we’re given. Whether you find yourselves at the not-so-desirable end of the gratitude spectrum or you are bursting forth with that inimitable spirit of thanks this holiday, take a breath. Pause. And know that the divine light within you is always there, waiting to break forth. Ever present. Inextinguishable. And often, unexpected.