

Fundamental Trust

All Saints' Day; Reformation Day

Text: Genesis 1:2; Psalm 104:29-30; John 20:22; Acts 2:2

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

There is a word that combines all the scripture lessons - Genesis and Creation, the Spirit of God or the breath of God or the wind of God hovering over the chaos. On the Day of Pentecost, it's a mighty rushing wind that brings new life. In the Psalm, the Psalm that celebrates all living creatures says, "God, when you withhold your breath, they die. When you breath, grant them your Spirit, they live, they are created." In the Gospel, the story of resurrection as John tells it, on the eve of Easter, Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Throughout the whole of the scripture, breath and wind symbolize the life-giving, energizing power and presence of God. The wind that cannot be seen, but whose effects one can feel, the wind and the spirit and the breath in Hebrew - all the same word, indicating the fact that there is the sense that life and vitality and energy is the consequence of the outflowing of that font of all being - breathing life into all that is.

On this All Saints Day, I was thinking about death and dying, memory and hope, and yesterday for some reason, uncharacteristically, my eye fell on the obituary section. I never read the obituaries. Someone suggested to me recently that at my age I perhaps ought to because I may show up there. But, I simply don't. Some people always read the obituaries. I never do. But, something caught my eye; it was the death of a person announced as "leaving for the throne of God where she is now at worship," and it went on to speak about the service that would be a celebration of her life and of her eternal salvation. The question that came into my mind as I read that obituary was, "Do you really believe that?" Not, "Is that true or not," but whether those who wrote the obituary really believe it because it struck me that it was almost saying too much, it was almost shouting too loud, it was the kind of thing we do when we're not sure of ourselves, so we keep repeating it to ourselves until we finally believe it. I'm not saying that that was at all the case, but, simply what came to my mind. It seemed like there was too much affirmation of too much certainty about things about which we really don't know. I just wonder whether or not that strong affirmation did not mask a deep-seated doubt.

I went on, I suppose because of today, to read more of the obituary entries and I found that it was somewhat common to say so and so went to be with the Lord or is in eternal rest or whatever. Those kinds of customs, that kind of language is so deeply rooted in us, it sort of trips off our tongue very easily, without even thinking. Those statements in the obituary underscored in my mind that of which I have become increasingly aware, but affirmed again that the Christian tradition has been very largely "other-worldly," that the big event is somewhere else, some other time, and that there is, it seems to be inevitably, a denigration of this present life and existence, where that focus is so strong on a future, another round, another act, the big event, as I said, a failure to recognize the wonder and the beauty and the grandeur of this present existence.

Then, as I got to thinking about that, I started to ask myself all kinds of questions. I wonder, if heaven was the necessary counterpoint to hell, hell being the condition or place, whatever, depending on the imagery, of eternal condemnation for those who do not find their salvation through Jesus Christ. And if I've done away with hell (just a minor move on my part), I wondered whether or not that removed the necessity of heaven. I wonder if heaven was simply that counterpart if you have a system of rewards and punishment and if this life is controlled and well-controlled by ecclesiastical authorities, to have some punch there has to be something at the end. Because, the more I thought about it, the more I recognized in my dealing with people that it's very primal in people, this idea of what's going to happen in the end, or the desire for immortality or the resurrection of the body, or how ever you want to phrase it, something very primal in us, wondering about the mystery of life.

Life is such a mystery. I've been with a number of people who breathed their last. What a mystery. There is a person, particularly those who are still cognizant and conscious, and then the last breath. Life is such a mystery, and inevitably, we'll wonder about it and deep down there is that primal need and desire for something more, and I recognize, too, that there is good reason for that whole structure of final judgment because, after all, life is not fair. Some people get away with murder. Some people suffer all their days. Some people leave us too soon. But yet, what is too soon? The spouse of 50 or 60 years? Certainly there are children who die who never have the opportunity to realize all of their marvelous potential. I understand. There are reasons why humankind in its various traditions of faith have had something to say about the end or something more or the final solution. But, as I thought more and more about it, thinking about today and this moment, I thought about how my own understanding and sensitivities have moved in recent years. I just have to tell you, I think you sense it, probably, that for me, the focus has moved so much more from anything beyond to this present moment, enabling me to celebrate this life, to live it with reverence and with awe and wonder-filled amazement, to appreciate this life, this world, this good earth, these human relationships, this present moment to live and to love. That, for me, has become increasingly the focus of my own fascination and attention and passion.

But, finally, we don't know, do we? It is a mystery, isn't it?

I was in the car the other day listening to National Public Radio and a writer read an essay and he began by saying that he had never had a vision or a trembling in his soul or any kind of a spiritual moment like that, and I thought of myself because I've often said to you I've never had a tinkle in my pinkie. But, then he went on to say, "Life is mysterious. Let me tell you about my mother. My mother died recently and when I went home at the point of her death, I visited the neighbor woman who said, 'You know, your mother came over here the day before she died, and she told me this story. She said, "I was in the living room and there was Frank, my husband, and it was all very normal, and I got up and went into the other room and I said, 'Oh, my goodness, he's been gone for eleven years,' She said, 'I rushed back into the living room and he wasn't there.'"

The writer said, "My mother lived all of her life knowing that she had an aneurysm that could go at any moment. That night the aneurysm broke and she died peacefully. I don't understand it. Life is more mysterious than we could ever fathom."

I would agree. I don't know. I really don't know. But, I know that what has become more important for me increasingly is to live now and to love now and to be aware now, and then to live with fundamental trust over against whatever else may be.

Fundamental trust. That's a concept which comes out of child psychology. I think it was Eric Erickson who distinguished fundamental trust from fundamental mistrust. The critical first year of a child, the way a child is handled, cooed over, cherished, makes that child bodily sense that reality can be trusted.

I remember Hans Küng in 1983, and I spent some time with him talking about his book *Does God Exist?*, where he traced modern atheism down to the nihilism of Nietzsche and then he said, "I was trying to make a turn because I didn't want to leave in nihilism, I wanted to make an affirmation of my own faith in God," and he said to make that turn, to get out of the abyss of nihilism, he found the concept of fundamental trust the means by which he began again to build the steps of faith.

Fundamental trust is a pre-rational disposition of the heart. It is not to be identified with a belief system in which we have faith. "I believe in the Christian creed," or something like that. It's a pre-rational existence of the heart; it's that which one sets one's heart upon before one even begins to think. It is the setting of the soul. That fundamental trust, it seems to me, is the most precious gift for a human being who lives in the wonder of this life and faces the mystery of death not knowing, but trusting.

I put three quotations in your liturgy - Hans Küng, basic, fundamental trust in reality. And then a statement from Eric Fromm who looks at it all and says my

conclusion is that the human person is alone in the universe. And then a statement by Dag Hammarskjöld who says I don't know when it was. I don't even remember answering the question, but at some point I said "Yes" to someone or something and from that moment I know that my life has had meaning.

Well, I think what Hammarskjöld witnesses to and Küng points to is not even impossible for Fromm because one could live in this universe believing one is alone and bring meaning to it, nonetheless. But, I find myself more comfortable with a rather vague affirmation of fundamental trust. We use the words of Julian of Norwich around here -

All will be well. All will be well, and all manner of things will be well.

We use them with integrity, because all will be well does not mean all will be peaches and cream. All will be well does not mean that any particular faith structure, be it Christian or Jewish or Buddhist, or whatever, that any belief structure is the way it is. All will be well, lived out of fundamental trust, enables me to live today, to celebrate today, to live fully and to love freely, and to trust, to trust, fundamentally to trust, to be deeply settled, to be at home in this world, wide-eyed and awaiting whatever there is beyond this. That is enough for me.