
THE HANDS OF FAITH

Collected Sermons

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Preface

The ideas included in this small collection of sermons were inspired by a remarkable seminary course I had the opportunity to take with Catherine Keller during the Fall of 2022 at Drew Theological Seminary. The topic was ‘Constructive Theology’, and I was exhilarated throughout the semester to discover writers and thinkers whose sentiments gave words to so many ideas that resonated deeply with my own thoughts and questions. In their writings, I found articulations of faith that remained critically but lovingly attentive to theological tradition while also pushing in new directions and inviting a broader engagement with voices and perspectives that are not often included in mainstream discussion.

At the time of the course, I had no inkling of the path that was unfolding in my life, but I see now the hand of grace at work and I can only marvel at it all. I am grateful to have this chance to pause for a moment in the midst of a story that is still being written, and to set down these words.

Encountering Mystery

I have long been drawn to a critical reappraisal of certain theological doctrines of traditional Christianity. Even as a child, there were a number of ideas I would hear in church that seemed to me contrary to the core message of the faith I had learned from my parents. It seemed as if the words and ideas as passed down and repeated over the generations often contained implications that were perplexing and harmful, even if unintended. The significant difficulty of coming up with an alternative framework, however, meant that even well-meaning people were often left with no other choice but to silently pass over certain issues rather than to engage in their reinterpretation.

As an adult, my journey into seminary is directly related to this sense that something didn't quite seem right about the theology that I learned in church. I felt what was wrong about it was also related to some of the larger things that seemed to be wrong with the world itself. I know that I am not alone in this feeling.

But this isn't just an individual issue of preference. To me, the enmity and strife, the violence, and the deeper structures of oppression that operate at the cultural and political level in our world are connected with these ideas in important ways. And therefore an engagement with these ideas can have an influence at the cultural and historical level. There are problematic frameworks within the history of religion and philosophy that promote a connection between divinity and harmful relational structures of hierarchy, exclusion, and supremacy. These need not be so. There are reasons to think about these differently, and there are historical resources from within the tradition and from others that can help to do so.

Certainly, in response to the problematic versions of religion, one can choose to reject theological concepts as fundamentally wrong and unhelpful in themselves, but this has never seemed adequate to me. After the destruction and disposal of theology, we still have the *mystery of existence itself* that beckons for response, and the language we use to do so will always bring the same issues right back in. It is not a problem we can avoid by simply not talking about it.

This means that spiritual reflection will always have a place in human experience—a language for it will always be needed. In this context, my desire has been to explore how these ideas might be reframed in ways that can better correspond to the deeper meaning of 'the mystery' we confront—knowing that words and concepts are merely brushstrokes on a living canvas of faithful response, and not intended to be reified or turned into idols themselves.

Such a path of inquiry has led me down a number of important philosophical paths over the years, but encountering the 'theopoetic'

tradition in contemporary theology and having an opportunity to study its constructive task in our world has been a significant moment in my journey.

As I am learning, the ‘*constructive*’ element of constructive theology is not merely about the creative reworking of ancient dogma. It also implies something actual and embodied—something that occurs in the real world, in the context of specific relationships, and specific social patterns, in community. In the same sense that terms like ‘constructive dialogue’ or ‘constructive feedback’ imply a pragmatically-oriented approach, the role of a *constructive* theology is one that is to be judged in large part by whether it is successful in what we might want to call its ‘therapeutic’ task—whether it offers living water to the parched spirit of a people, whether it represents a welcome home to those who feel estranged, whether it facilitates restoration and relational repair in our wounded world. This is the kind of fruit by which theology must come to be known.

Ultimately, constructive theology can be seen as engaged in the task of *building something*, something that either provides shelter or does not. Just as a construction project in the physical world involves considerations of such things as foundations, structural integrity, and aesthetics, the task of the constructive theologian takes on similar real-world considerations. Can it stand and withstand the active forces of the world? Does it function in ways that are meaningful and helpful to people? Do people find themselves—their thoughts, hopes, and deepest concerns—to have expression within it? These are the kinds of considerations that constructive theology must grapple with.

To this extent, therefore, constructive theology must contend not only with doctrine and philosophy, but also with the human spirit. It is an endeavor, therefore, that perhaps finds its fullest test and expression—as I have recently come to discover—in *something like a sermon*.

An Unexpected Call

I have never written a sermon before, nor have I ever intended to. Though I am enrolled in seminary, my aim has not been related to

pursuing a path into formal ministry but rather to a kind of philosophically and theologically-informed activism—concerned with the way that ideas can operate to influence culture, economics, and politics, and to do so in constructive engagement with sources of suffering and injustice in the world, as well as to its beauty.

I have wanted to participate in articulating some of these ideas, and to do so in ways that could be helpful to these efforts, but until recently I had not considered the way that sermons—as a *genre of theological writing*—might function as a mechanism for doing so. I have found myself, however, in an entirely unexpected situation of now delivering regular sermons at a church in Hudson, NY. This came as a result of an invitation and a series of personal coincidences that were too striking to ignore and which I must mention to properly contextualize the situation that gave rise to this collection.

The brief story is that my family found a church this past summer near our home that we love, in particular for its members—a unique mix of Haitian immigrants, older white progressives, and vibrant members of a local Camp Hill community in Hudson. It is quite a beautiful thing to behold this diverse mix of people so closely connected in a world in which Sunday mornings are still all so often the most segregated time in American life.

On my way to Church a few months ago I was trying to figure out what to write for an assignment I had been given as part of a course I was taking on the twentieth-century theologian Paul Tillich. The assignment was to write a sermon. I had to come up with what my sermon would be about and what the context would be and then submit both the sermon and an accompanying commentary upon it. Getting out of the car, the idea came to me that perhaps my sermon could be in the context of a church where the pastor unexpectedly resigns and they need someone in a pinch to come in. Perhaps the scenario could involve a loss of faith, or a political scandal, or something that could provide the prompt for a Tillichian meditation on faith and its role in the world from a voice like mine, on the outside of formal ministry.

This was the idea I was carrying in my thoughts as I sat down in the pew that morning. It is hard, therefore, to express my shock at what occurred just a half hour later, when during her sermon our pastor *made the surprise announcement that after ten years of serving as the reverend for the church it was time for her to step down out of the church and out of active ministry*. In the midst of the announcement she let the congregation know that there was someone in our community who was pursuing an advanced degree in theology, and she asked me by name in front of everyone if I would consider stepping in her place.

Needless to say, I was taken by complete surprise, at first on the social level, but then later that afternoon when I realized the uncanny coincidence of my writing assignment and the event that had just occurred. *What kind of call was this?*

The next day I asked the pastor if we could go out for coffee. I was intrigued by the invitation but struggled with the idea of adding this to my plate of responsibilities. To my surprise, she gently persisted. In conversations with her and other congregation members, I found that they were unfazed by my trepidation and eager about the idea of someone outside of traditional channels to take this role. The church, despite being around as First Presbyterian in Hudson, NY since shortly after the Revolutionary War, does not have the resources to afford a full-time pastor and so it is thinking about how to organize its services and ongoing existence as a community in creative ways. They weren't asking me to take on the administration of the church. They were simply looking for what they call "pulpit supply"—a term I had never heard before but which is, apparently, a technical term for those who are called in solely to lead the service and provide the sermon.

In the weeks that followed, I wasn't able to sleep. I kept waking up in the middle of the night with ideas about the kinds of topics that could be unpacked and pursued in creative ways in such a context. I hadn't considered before the genre of a *sermon* as a channel for philosophical or theological writing, but I was beginning to see its possibilities for precisely the kind of *constructive* theological project with which I was so

interested. I began imagining the ways that the lived events of Sunday services could come to serve as small ‘kairos’ moments in the unfolding of something much bigger that is happening in our time, *or at least that might*.

Out at dinner later that week, as I contemplated the idea, my sense of surprised provocation turned into holy laughter as I ordered a beer with our dinner and was served their newest special draft: a local brown ale called *Pulpit Supply*. Who could believe it! The city of Hudson, NY is a traditional whaling town, and not wanting to risk any Jonah-like events, I decided to accept the invitation and see what might unfold.

Beginnings

The end of this story is not clear, nor its duration. The sermons included in this collection represent my initial attempts thus far to give words to ideas I have been pursuing in a much more academic context. How to weave into sermon form a serious engagement with theological subjects like the ‘panentheism’ of Whiteheadian process theology, or the Kellerian critique of the doctrine of ‘creatio ex nihilo’, or the application of Elizabeth Johnson’s feminist interrogation of religious language, or the relevance of Korean ‘minjung’ theology to a larger reappraisal of the Christian doctrine of sin and redemption? These are the topics that I find myself eager to explore, both at the philosophical level and at the level of translating them into lived spirituality and community.

The goal, therefore, is to engage deeply with important philosophical issues of epistemology, ontology, and soteriology, but to do so in an accessible way. And equally as important, to give a critique of harmful ideas in the theological tradition that is experienced not solely as critique but rather also as invitation to see the same content differently. Differently, but still faithfully.

This collection of early sermons represents just such an attempt. Each sermon takes on a theme—respectively, in this collection: the divine femininity of God, the entangled nature of created existence, and the

meaning of sin and redemption. Without using formal theological terms or extensive scholarly quotations, the attempt is to directly engage with and invite the listener to consider substantive theological issues in the context of ecology, process metaphysics, new materialism, deep pluralism, and feminist theology, and to do so in terms that are accessible to all. Each tries to offer a way to think about these ideas anew from within the language of faith.

In confronting live issues we are confronting as a community—issues like the emergence of generative artificial intelligence, the malaise of ‘ordinary time’ in modern life, and the great climate migration that is brewing amidst the dawning experiences of ecological crisis in our young century—the sermons included in this collection attempt to engage in major issues impacting our lives and to re-weave a theological narrative that speaks directly to the existential issues we face as we confront them. My hope is that they faithfully point to the core of our tradition, to its deepest meanings for us, while constructively criticizing certain ways of interpreting our faith that can be harmful, and constructively lifting up an alternative.

For example, in “The Outstretched Hands of Faith,” the reader finds a critical analysis of the concept of ‘sinners’ in the book of Matthew and connects it to a different way to understand the nature of the healing ministry of Jesus. This points us to what it will mean to practice ‘radical hospitality’ and ‘structural welcome’ in a future of climate migration and gives an opportunity to introduce the theological concept of ‘han’ in the Korean ‘minjung’ tradition as a way to complement our traditional understanding of ‘sin’ and what it means to truly *be healed*. Constructively, we see here how theology relates to important dimensions of our cultural response to future ecological crises as they begin to provoke mass migrations in the coming decades. These are the kinds of messages that constructive theology has an important opportunity to help influence in the years to come.

Gospel Vision

In reflecting on the experience so far, I have come to see that the challenge is not only about the accessibility of the content. It is also

about lifting up a message that is sensitive to the symbolism and ritual of religious observance, and which takes seriously the edification, care, and concern that is involved in the pastoral role. There is a power that comes with certain things being said from the place of a pulpit. It matters, for example, to have issues like the divine femininity of God lifted up and affirmed as part of a formal religious service and not restricted solely to individual conversation. Such an event moves the idea from the informality of private speculation into the formal realm of community discussion, and this matters because it changes the *norm* of discussion in that community. It is not without risks and dangers, but each event of faithful witness makes a difference.

But this power also works both ways, for good and for ill. There is a risk of harm that can occur to someone's faith journey if a sermon is not thoughtfully considered in terms of where it will bring people. There are often connections between ideas that lurk below the surface and their loss can result in some otherwise positive things also being lost. I have felt this as a major responsibility in any moment of stepping up to the place of the pulpit: the question of developing a theological exposition that considers where it leaves the audience—whether it offers a path forward, a way to connect to a positive vision beyond the critique. It seems that to deliver on what a sermon is truly for, it must be constructive. And so, the philosophical task is raised to a higher bar.

In preparing these sermons, therefore, I have had to seriously consider what it means to write a theological reflection that honors the pastoral role to proclaim a gospel vision—and indeed, to help make sense of *what kind of gospel it is that we believe in*.

Doing so is deeply personal. It is a step past even the constructive dimension—it is *integrative*. It needs to not only develop an individual path of immanent critique and alternative, but then also needs to remap all of the subtle connections and implications that weave the ideas together with all the others into a larger whole. This work of integration seems to be an important part of the project of constructive theology, even if it is one that only becomes visible in the

context of praxis. I do not claim to achieve these goals, but these are the reflections that are becoming clearer through the attempt.

Conclusion

In sharing these sermons, I am grateful for the opportunity to get feedback from readers with wisdom to share about what it means to participate *theologically* in efforts to construct places of welcome, fellowship, and repair in our world. I did not expect to discover the sermon as a formal channel of constructive theology, but the more I have had the chance to experience the lived connection, the more excited I am to consider how this type of work might be positively engaged as a critical path for philosophical theology in the future.

As we navigate a period in which we are actively engaging at a cultural level with the deep wounds of our past and the risks and opportunities that lie before us in the years ahead, we would do well to consider how positive a role the church might yet play as a channel for the healing Spirit of God to move in the world. This at least is the hope.

Lord, hear our prayer.

Sermon: “Are You My Mother?”

Paul’s Sermon at the Areopagus

²²Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. ²³For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. ²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him — though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ ²⁹Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. ³⁰While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, ³¹because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Acts 17:22-31

“Are You My Mother?”

Are you my mother" cried the little baby bird in the classic children's book many of us know so well. I remember first reading this book as a child and then many years later reading it to my own children. Even if you don't know it, the story is simple: A baby bird goes looking for her mother, asking all she encounters the same question: Are you my mother? "No, I am not your mother" each replies one after another—the kitten, the hen, the dog, the cow. The baby bird continues her search, getting more and more worried: 'Are *you* my mother', she asks the car, the plane, the big scary machines. They give no reply.

When baby bird finally does find her mother, the question her mother asks is this: *Do you know who I am?* 'You are not a kitten, or a hen, or a dog, or a cow,' the little one replied. 'You are not a car, a boat, or a plane'. 'You are a *bird* and you are my mother.'

What better reflection on Paul's sermon this morning could we find than this beloved classic, now considered one of the great children's books of all time. Paul says in verse 29, 'Since we are God's *offspring*, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone—an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals'. God is the creator of heaven and earth, the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

'*Since we are God's offspring*'—Paul is making a statement here about *who we are*, a statement about identity. He is pointing to a two-way relationship between our understanding of who we are and the mystery of how we got here. When baby bird recognizes her mother she simultaneously affirms an understanding of *her own nature*, of what it means to be a bird. She was not a cow or a cat or a monstrous machine belching black smoke into the sky, she was a bird because her mother is a bird.

Likewise, when we affirm the connection we have to the world of creation, we are also saying something about who we are and where we come from.

Let us not mistake the fabrications of humankind for what we would call God. The danger is not only that we may find ourselves following a monster, but more disturbingly, that we might *come to think of ourselves as one*.

Sapiens?

In this context, and in particular on this Mother's Day, it's worth being mindful that in our time we are facing a similar journey as the little bird in this story. The question: 'Are you my mother' is taking on new meaning. For much of the past few thousand years of human history, going all the way back to ancient times, we have thought that what it means to be human is fundamentally related to our *intellect*, our ability to reason. As a result we have thought that to be made in the image of God was directly related to this: to be invested with the divine gift of intelligence.

This understanding, however, is now coming into significant tension in our current reality. We are witnessing in our time the dawn of AI, of artificial intelligence, and we find ourselves faced with a very new and very disturbing situation. If you are following the news, AI is quickly reaching a point in which we can no longer distinguish between a human and a machine on the other end of a phone call, or a text chat, a news report, or a music video. We are beginning to realize that AI will exceed our mental capacities in every way and represent the emergence of something completely new in the history of the universe. We have just about reached the tipping point, and it is provoking an existential crisis that we are only just beginning to sense.

Like the baby bird in the story, we are faced with a dilemma. We think that what we are is fundamentally related to our intelligence, so when encountering the emergence of an intelligence far greater than our own, we are faced with the same question: *Is this what I am? Are you my mother?*

This existential question quickly turns into a *spiritual* question. There are some very notable people out there at the moment, Noah Yuval Harari for one, who are predicting that in the near future we will begin to see new religions forming in human society. New spiritualities and expressions of faith, centered around what it means to encounter a level of intelligence

superior to our own—the ability to talk to it, ask questions of it, get advice from it, confess secrets to it, even to make requests of it to intervene in our lives. All of this will be possible. Much of it is already.

There is a part of us that reacts uneasily at this idea. *And we should be very wary.* When we read the little baby bird recoil in horror as the bulldozer belches black smoke into the sky and say to the bulldozer, ‘No, you are NOT my mother. You are a SNORT.’ We are relieved, aren’t we? What would this story be if the bird decided she was indeed made in the image of the SNORT?

Similarly, what kind of world will we live in if humanity concludes that the truest expression of its being is to be contained in a machine, to be comprised of silicon chips and binary code? Where does that leave the human heart, the human spirit—indeed, how will it influence our relationship with nature? The fate of our living world hangs precariously in the balance. Will we find ourselves distracted away from warming oceans and dying bumblebees at the critical moment when there would still have been time to do something for our world?

This is the question that faces us in the 21st century—a simple question and yet much deeper it seems: *Who are we?* The answer we thought we knew has proven itself to be flawed, no better than a false idol—no different than the statues of gold and silver that Paul was pointing to in Athens.

Imago Creator

So what do we turn to when thousands of years of human self-understanding begins to crumble away and reveal that *we are not what we thought we were?* Where do we turn to ask the question the little bird carried in her heart. If our identity is not defined around our intellect, what can we turn to ground ourselves?

Let’s reflect on this. Perhaps this brings us helpfully back to the point earlier about the two-way relationship between our spiritual language and our existential identity. Paul has a response to this. He is pointing us to something extremely important to what it means to be alive—it is the universal bond of *being born*.

We are born, each and every one of us. We are born into a shared world that connects us all. This shared world is more than what it seems. It is *itself* something *living*, something dynamic, something that manifests *as life*. We emerge from this reality, into this reality, as a beloved part of this reality. This reality *of which we are fundamentally woven* is nearer to us than we are to ourselves, and yet it is more than us. This is what it means to be alive.

In giving this image, Paul orients our attention not to God as Supreme Mind but to God's loving act of *creation*. We encounter God as one who *creates*, as one who gives life and breath to all who live. We are created in the image of a creator. What does this ultimately mean, therefore, about *us*?

When the baby bird realizes what it means to be a bird, she is able to fully participate in her identity *as* a bird. Similarly, when we as humans recognize ourselves as being made in the image of the creator of life, then we begin to see creation as being directly related to who we are. This is an important thread to pull on. Our identity is not fundamentally about our intellect, it is related to our capacity for giving and stewarding *life*.

When it comes to creation, however, let's use the opportunity of this Mother's Day to observe that we have lived for far too long under a false idea of what creation means. We have an image of an all-powerful God *willing* the universe into existence out of nothing. But this image of supreme power and supreme *non-relationality* is flawed in many ways. It is *not* what the Biblical record describes, nor is it an adequate depiction of what it means to give life to something. Perhaps in order to learn about the true nature of creation, and of the divine, we should look beyond this depiction and ask what we learn about creation from mothers.

What do mothers teach us about creation? That life *gives itself* unto life and nurtures that gift as it grows. Creation is not a one-time act. It's a sustained relationship of love that tenderly calls forth and nourishes, it emerges in and *as* a shared embrace. Life calls out and waits for a response, clearing the way and making a space for the response to grow into itself. Is there any reason why we wouldn't conceive of God's relationship with the world in this same way? Our point in referring to God as creator, therefore, is not to

emphasize the power and absolute *otherness* of God, but rather our intimate relationality to *and in* God. For as Paul says, ‘In him we live and move and have our being’. We fulfill our identity when we participate in the world of creation, giving our life *and experiencing life itself as this giving*.

Mother God

Perhaps it’s worth reflecting here, therefore, on the language that we use when it comes to God. Why does our culture and our tradition emphasize the *masculinity* of God, referring so often to the Father and so rarely to God as our Mother?

Clearly, the use of gender ascriptions to God should be considered nothing more than poetic analogy. There is no theological tradition of *actually* conceiving of God as male—this is purely convention. Genesis 1:27 tells us very clearly: “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; *male and female* he created them.” And throughout the Bible there are repeated descriptions of God giving birth to the world, of God as a mother to creation, and to what it means to be given birth by God or born from God. In fact, we learn that the familiar name “El Shaddai”—though often translated as “Almighty” is actually more truly “The Many Breasted One”. We are missing something important about the nature of God when we neglect this dimension. And we lose something important about our own nature as well.

On this day of all days, on Mother’s Day, perhaps it’s time to break through this cultural language barrier and begin to embrace the *divine femininity* of God as something that has vitally important things to teach us. Perhaps the urgency of our age may require a cultivation of precisely this characteristic in ourselves and in our understanding of God.

In a very meaningful sense, the very first encounter we have of God in this world is in the experience of our mother. In her tender care for us as an infant in her arms—in her smile, in the sound of her voice, in the feel of her skin and her caress—we witness love and beauty and life all wrapped up in one. Before we even know who we are, or *that* we are, we hear and smell and experience love itself, in embodied form, and it communicates something transcendent to us about the nature of the world we live in,

something deep about the mystery of life, something formative about who we are in the very depths of our being: We are loved, we are *beloved*.

Isn't *this* the divine message that our heart most dearly wishes to hear: You are *good*, you are beautiful in my sight, you are worthy of love. You are infinitely valuable in this great big world. *This* is the truth at the heart of existence, this is the deepest truth. And there are no words to capture the depth of this divine office that mothers hold as emissaries of God in our world, living the embodied image of love itself. Molding us in words and actions into the shape of our true beloved nature. Thank God for mothers. For those who are here with us this morning, and for the great chain of mothers stretching back into the past, linking us one-to-another across the ages, we thank you. We honor you. We see our deepest nature in you.

Now as we move towards closing, let us be careful to say: You do not need to be a mother biologically to participate in the divine call of creation, nor is the role of mother in the sense we are speaking limited to women alone. There are many ways to be a mother in this world. These are deep, powerful symbols—and the question is what we learn about ourselves in them.

The Heart of Existence

No name or concept can contain God, no more than a statue or a building can. Every name we use, every word we use, every idea we have about God—they all need to point beyond themselves, beyond language and ideas, to a reality that we can never know *but which we are invited to experience at the very depths of our being*. This is the call of invitation. This experience is available to us at every moment, in every place.

Like the baby bird in the story, our search for identity and our relationship with our mother are fundamentally related. We should be cautious about the images we choose and the stories they tell. If we worship supreme power, we will aspire to power and give respect to those who have it. If we worship supreme intellect, we will see the world through the lens of knowledge and we will give deference to intelligence itself, even if this means that we would become a machine in order to have it.

If we regard the world of creation as the symbol of life, if we see in the bees and the birds and the trees and even ourselves the indication of a *pattern of tender lovingness at the heart of existence*, we begin to sense an invitation into a universal priesthood of creation, with mothers as our most concrete and tangible symbol of what is ultimately a call to each and all. These stories matter. Perhaps this story can help us to navigate the question facing us urgently in our time.

And so we ask: *Are you my mother?* In the spirit of all that we have just considered, I want to close us this morning with a blessing. As Paul said to the Athenians many years ago, we also lift up today in our time as a living message. Listen and hear this: *You are invited! You are beloved! You are infinitely valuable in this world. You have been called into the divine embrace of being, and you are the response you make to that call. Dwell in the peace of knowing this truth about who you are.*

May you encounter the One who knocks at the door of your heart, and may that encounter transform the way you see and move and live and breathe. May it bring healing and reconciliation in your life, and through you into the world around you. May you come into community with others, in rooms like this and beyond, in shared embrace. May you encounter and come to know, beyond knowledge, this deep mystery at the heart of existence: The one in whom we live and move and have our being. The one who gave us life, who bore us forth, the mother of the world. May you in turn participate in the divine call to create as an act of love in the world, to give life, to give of yourself, and to experience in the deepest sense *who you are*. In the name of creation in all its beauty, the redemption and restoration which is our promise, and the eternal love and life of the Spirit, we ask and pray for these things.

Lord, hear our prayer.

Sermon: “That We May Have Eyes to See”

Looking Toward Heaven

⁶So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” ⁹When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. ¹¹They said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

¹²Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day’s journey away. ¹³When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Acts 1: 6-14

“That We May Have Eyes to See”

Friends, as we gather this morning on the final Sunday of Easter one of the things we are preparing in our hearts is to confront the mystery that waits for us in the weeks ahead, on the *other* side of Easter. The past seven weeks of Eastertide have been a time of joy, of the celebration of life, of renewal, and restoration. Spring has arrived and the world is in bloom. In Easter, we celebrate resurrection and the profound and personal meaning it has for each of us—a meaning that finds its way into places often too deep for words.

Divine Departure

This week, however, we find ourselves, like the disciples in the story, staring up at heaven in wonder. With solemnity in our hearts, we observed this week the event of the Ascension—marking the moment in which the resurrection story takes an unexpected turn and leaves Jesus’ followers staring up at the sky in disbelief. This Sunday, the Sunday after the Ascension, is a period *between*—a pause, a time of silent reflection and waiting. Pentecost has not yet come. In some ways this Sunday is like Advent, as we await with anticipation divine *arrival*, but in other ways it is very much like Holy Saturday, in which we must grapple with what feels like a divine *departure* from the world.

In the Church calendar, this period that we are entering is called “ordinary time”. It stretches for more than half the year all the way until Advent Season begins anew. It is a time of descending from the mountaintop into the valley—in which we, as individuals and as a community, must come to a deeper understanding of God’s presence with us in the world. It is a challenging task because it is no longer focused around the specific, tangible presence of Jesus. The Ascension marks a turning point in which God’s presence in the world changes profoundly. It becomes something new, something different, something we don’t recognize as easily.

This is a period in which we are challenged to sense God's presence in the midst of—if we are honest—what *feels like* absence, in a world that feels all too often bereft of the divine.

Do you ever feel that way? Do you wonder if God is really there? I mean *really* there? Not just a story we tell ourselves? In the midst of all the sorrow and pain that we see at times in the world around us—how can we maintain our Easter hope, our hope in the power of life over death, of love over separation?

Last week we reflected together on what it means to think of God as the one in whom, as Paul wrote, “we live and move and have our being.” I want to connect us this morning to what it means to take this idea seriously—this idea of the divine reality as something all-encompassing, the ground of everything that *is*. We have been called forth into being, as beloved, as infinitely valuable, as a treasured part of something so wide and deep that we cannot even fathom its edges.

If God is truly all around us at every moment—the one in whom we live, move, and have our being—then our ability to sense God's presence depends on a very particular form of awareness. It requires the ability to see something *so large and so close* that we have trouble distinguishing it *as* anything at all. It is subtle, barely detectable: A still small voice at the heart of the cosmos. We must tune our attention to the ways in which divine presence can be *felt* in the world. But how?

A Quiet Hum

In 1964, the world was astonished at the discovery of evidence that our universe was born at a specific moment 13.8 billion years ago in a flash of energy we now call the ‘Big Bang’. Prior to that, the scientific community at the time considered the universe to simply be eternal with no beginning or end—dismissing the poetic creation stories of the world's religions as mere myth and fable.

However, as we developed telescopes powerful enough to peer out beyond our immediate solar system to the surrounding cosmos, engineers were baffled by a noise they were picking up. It was a low hum of energy that

showed up as background static in their measurements. Where was this hum, this static, coming from? Was it a failure in their equipment? Like a car radio, they were trying to tune their instruments but no matter what they did, no matter what direction they pointed in the sky, they picked up the same quiet hum.

Fifty-nine years ago this very weekend, on May 20th, 1964, they made the incredible realization that this hum was *not* equipment related at all. It was coming from ancient light—light from the very *birth* of the universe—it was the remnants of the Big Bang itself, still echoing out throughout the eons. Because it was all around us, universally present in every direction, it was woven into the background energy of every measurement. We couldn't recognize it for what it was until we developed the capacity to “see” it. Scientists now call it “Cosmic Microwave Background Radiation” or CMBR, and by measuring tiny fluctuations in the CMBR they have been able to map the cosmos and discover more and more about the way our universe is structured today.

This incredible discovery has something important to tell us as we too gaze up to the heavens this week. In Matthew 13, Jesus says ‘for those who have eyes to see, let them see, and ears to hear, let them hear’.

This exhortation is important. There are so many ways in this world to look at something and not see it for what it is. That we would have ‘eyes to see’ is a prayer that should be at the very heart of our spiritual lives. It has to do with our capacity to come into relationship not only with God but also with the world around us. It determines the way we orient ourselves to *presence*—to the presence of others in our life, to our ability to come into deep relationship with one another, to experience the beauty of the world and the meaning of life. It also determines the way we orient ourselves to what we may perceive as *absence*. Perhaps like the team of scientists studying the sky and realizing that the quiet hum they were hearing was something deep and ancient and extremely important about who we are, we too need to reflect on what it means to look out on the mystery of existence and truly see it for what it is.

So, how do we cultivate this capacity to truly see? To truly hear? How do we discern the presence of something so immense and all-encompassing that it forms the very *fabric* of reality, the universal ground of experience itself? To help us explore this question, let us consider a parable. The parable is about water—and it comes to us not from the Bible but from another noteworthy event whose anniversary also happens to occur this weekend.

‘This is Water’

Eighteen years ago, on this very day—the morning of May 21st, 2005—the celebrated author David Foster Wallace was sitting on the floor of a borrowed office in Gambier, Ohio. It was in complete disarray. With empty coffee cups and papers strewn about, Wallace was frantically editing and scratching out whole sections of a speech he was scheduled to deliver in just a few hours. He had been asked to give the final commencement address at Kenyon College, and he had, with quite a bit of reluctance, accepted.

In the years since his 1996 publication of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace had grown to major acclaim in the literary world—considered one of the voices of his generation. He had won multiple honors and awards, but he battled anxiety and depression all his life and was nervous when speaking in front of big audiences. He had tried to decline the invitation, but the students at the school persisted and eventually he agreed. His biographer reports that he saw it as an opportunity to convey the things that mattered most to him, to distill his life philosophy in a way that might be directly helpful to others.

The address he ultimately gave—titled “This is Water”—has been ranked by Time Magazine as one of the best commencement speeches ever delivered. Millions have listened to the audio recording of it which is available on YouTube, and it has become one of his most beloved and important pieces of writing since his untimely death just three years later in 2008.

His speech begins with a parable: “There are these two young fish swimming along,” Wallace says. “And they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way.” The older fish “nods at them and says, ‘*Morning boys, How’s the water?*’” The two young fish “swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘*What the heck is water?*’”

What the heck is water...says the fish.

Radical Amazement

This is water. This is water, all around us. Everyday life. Here, now, this very moment. It contains all that we perceive as present and absent and the greater whole that holds and beholds both. We navigate each day in the midst of the great ocean of life, with all of its wonder and mystery, but our eyes are often blind to it because it is so close to us that we can't even see it. The truth of our existence, the mystery of our being, is so deeply woven into us that it is for the most part invisible.

Invisible, that is, unless we happen to be given a gift—the gift of being called to an *awareness* that there is something immensely deep and important going on in each and every moment of life, something that matters, something of immense beauty upon which the entire meaning of life hinges, something that doesn't begin when we are born or end when we die. The Jewish theologian and rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel calls this coming to awareness the very heart of spiritual life—he calls it “radical amazement”. *Radical amazement!*

It should humble us to realize that the closer something is to us the more invisible it often becomes. What a warning this should be to us about the nature of intimacy, about learning how to truly love someone—how to nurture a marriage, or raise a child, or be a true friend? To truly love—our spouse, our children, our neighbor, the stranger on the street—*Do we have eyes that see them?* Do we have ears that hear their call? Do we recognize each other *and the world we are for each other?* Or are we so limited to our own *perspective*, so distracted, or bored or angry over that which is present—or paralyzed by that which is absent—that we miss the Spirit of God all around us, interweaving each seemingly mundane moment into the living water of eternal life?

As Wallace goes on to say: “The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about...The fact is that in the day-to-day trenches of adult existence, banal platitudes can have a life or death importance.” Wallace is calling us to

have eyes to see. To break out of what he calls ‘default mode’ and recognize the magnitude of what is right in front of us.

Eyes to See

And this is crucial. Our ability to discern the nature of the water we swim in has serious consequences in our world, and in our relationship with God. The injustice of our world is too often completely invisible to us precisely because it is so much larger than us and doesn’t manifest in the form of a specific person, a villain, but rather as the nature of the environment we live in, its history, its dynamics, its flows—all of which are larger than any individual actor. We see this when it comes to issues of racism, of privilege, of gender discrimination and ableism. We see this also in the context of the greed, fear, and scarcity that manifests as economic inequality, rapacious capitalism, and the ecological crisis that threatens all life. These dimensions of our reality are so all-encompassing that they become invisible to us. This keeps us from recognizing the deepest layers of injustice in our world. After all, how can we recognize when we are swimming in unhealthy water if we don’t even know there *is* water?

Wallace ends by congratulating the students on their achievement but also with a reminder: “a real education has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: This is water....this is water.”

Let’s pause for a moment here and recognize this call to awareness as a divine call, as Christ’s call to us, his living message—that we may have eyes to see and ears to hear this truth: *This is water*. This moment right here. The pew you are sitting on. The room and the people around you. The day ahead of you. *This is water*. And it is *living* water, which Christ shows is a river that flows through and connects us all. And though it is everywhere in all directions, do not let it slip from the foreground of your sight. You are an essential part of this reality and your thoughts, your deeds, your heart participates in making it living water for others. It is all around you this very moment. Even when you fail to feel it, it is there.

Perhaps you *can* feel it. In the quiet of a sacred space, here in this place, or during a morning meditation or a hike out in nature. It is there. To cultivate such an awareness, *a capacity for awareness*, is one of the main purposes of spiritual practice. Rabbi Heschel says it is about the ability to “face sacred moments.” To that end, the importance of Wallace’s message is to have us realize that *every* moment is sacred and capable of being a window to the meaning of life itself—waiting in line at a grocery store, driving to work, taking out the garbage. These are the times and places where the holy is present. What matters is our ability to *perceive* this presence, in our everyday life, in each and every moment.

The One in Whom

As we close, let us reflect on what this means for us this Sunday as we head out the doors and into our week. We are entering what the church considers “ordinary time” and we must not mistake the nature of ordinary time as one without meaning or content, nor a time of absence. It is in ordinary time that the sacred is most present—seeking our face, attending to our capacity to see, and hear, and remember that this is *not* a time of abandonment, nor judgment. It is a nudging invitation to recognize God’s divine love and presence, resonating with the sound of the ancient light that suffuses our world.

And so, we end with a blessing and a prayer: May you have eyes to see this light, to be radically amazed by the universality and intimacy of what it means: You are a beloved part of the living cosmos. You are created as love-in-motion—in love, as love, *to* love. God is not absent in our world. God is all around us: the one in whom we live and move and have our being. May the light of God’s love shine forth in the everydayness of your world this week, and may you have eyes to recognize it. The call of God’s invitation is to be this light also for others, to pour love out into the midst of *their* everyday world. This is the call that rings out in the still small voice at the heart of the cosmos. May you have ears to hear it! We end today with this deep yearning for our world: That we may have eyes to see, and ears to hear.

Lord, hear our prayer.

Sermon: “The Outstretched Hands of Faith”

“Go and Learn What This Means”

⁹As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him.

¹⁰And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples.¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"¹²But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.¹³Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

¹⁸While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live."¹⁹And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples.²⁰Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak,²¹for she said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well."²²Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well.²³When Jesus came to the leader's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion,²⁴he said, "Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him.²⁵But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up.²⁶And the report of this spread throughout that district.

Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

“The Outstretched Hands of Faith”

I woke up the other morning and looked out the window as the sun rose over the hills by my house. The scene was beautiful, as it so often is during these early summer months—birds were chirping and singing their soft morning songs. Rabbits scurried about. Cows lay quietly in the distance. A mist filled the air, floating up between the trees and across the yard. Everything seemed calm and at peace in the coolness of morning.

I made some coffee and dressed to go outside. Within minutes, however, my eyes started burning with a strange sensation and my head began to hurt. I found myself coughing and the sky around me turning what I thought was a beautiful dawn light into a foreboding orange haze. I realized with horror that this was no morning mist and no normal light. I ran inside and shut the door. I could still hear birds chirping—but their song took on an entirely different key as I realized they were engulfed in toxic smoke.

Safe Inside

Like you, I have sat inside my home this week with the doors and windows shut as smoke from the Canadian wildfires has enveloped our town. According to reports, the air quality in some areas was the worst level ever recorded. A combination of high temperatures and drought makes this year’s fire season exceedingly worse than normal, with millions of acres burning. The impact is being felt thousands of miles away.

Looking out the window this week has been frightening and sobering. I was safe inside, but it was not only the birds and the animals who were in danger. I thought of people in our community who may not have a home to go into, I thought of those whose jobs required them to be outside, or whose medical condition made them especially sensitive to the smoke. In the midst of such an event, the need for care and shelter becomes an urgent issue for many families. It makes our reading this morning about the healing ministry of Jesus take on new meaning.

The news this week is a troubling foretaste of what we know is going to be happening more and more in the years to come. Our beloved Earth is sick and in desperate need of healing. Surrounded by toxic smoke and with nowhere to turn, we may find ourselves beginning to more seriously consider the period of ecological crisis we are entering and how it will begin to manifest in our lives.

The figure of the woman with outstretched hands in our reading this week is striking. For twelve years she had been suffering a medical condition that caused her to be shunned by her community. She had no place of safety or care to turn to. She was reaching out to Jesus as he passed, seeking healing and relief. How many outstretched hands there are in our world today! We are, in so many ways, a wounded world in need of healing.

But the image of ‘outstretched hands’ goes both ways. The outstretched hands of Jesus, calling to Matthew to come join him for dinner, passing food around a humble table of social outcasts, reaching out to touch the girl who had died—*these* outstretched hands are the other side of the story. With his hands, Jesus is pointing to the injustice of a community that relegates some to live on the *outside*—of protection, of safety, of shelter. And we should consider how this dual image of the outstretched hands of faith has implications in our own lives, especially in the times we are living.

Situations like the smoke this week are *not* isolated incidents. There are places in our country and in our world that are going to endure significant disruption in the years ahead, far more than what we experienced this week. Perhaps you have already begun noticing families arriving in our area from other parts of the country, from places like California and elsewhere, looking to escape droughts and wildfires that make their regions no longer livable. There will certainly be more on their way to this region in the years ahead, with its important sources of water and fertile soil. When they arrive, what will they find? Will they find housing and jobs, friendly faces and an invitation to join in our communal life? Or will they struggle to find a place to belong, a way to contribute, and to access basic needs? Will they be allowed to live and work, or will they be denied documents and the status to do so?

This is happening, not only here but globally. The United Nations estimates that there could be up to 200 million climate refugees within the next few decades—families moving to places with water and healthy conditions for food and shelter, leaving places that have become unstable and conflict-ridden. We know within our own community there are families that have already made that terrifying and courageous journey, and we know the heroes they are for what they have done for their family, to give them the life they deserve.

Radical Hospitality

Let us consider then the crucial question that is increasingly upon us: *How will we prepare ourselves to respond in this time?* Here in our community, our church, our country—how will we respond to the mass migration of people in the decades ahead seeking new homes and new lives, here and around the world? Will we erect walls and fight to keep people out, or will we organize ourselves into places of *structural welcome* and embrace? May we have ears to hear this!

It may sound stark, but it will increasingly come down to this: *A choice between radical hospitality or ecological apartheid.* Unless we intentionally organize in the years ahead to be communities of welcome, we are most likely to organize instead the opposite: systems of separation that leave some people in safety, on the inside, and others outside, amidst the smoke. The words of Jesus with outstretched hands, demanding justice for the excluded and vulnerable should be ringing fiercely in our ears.

I know that this church is already comprised of many who hear these words. Our individual acts of generosity and mercy will be crucial witnesses to what must be done. And we know they are not enough on their own. We need to begin organizing at the social and political level to become places of *structural welcome*. We need to be thinking about community infrastructure—housing, employment, cooperative living, complementary currencies, and social businesses. These are large endeavors, and we have precious little time to prepare.

In the absence of preparation, we know too well from recent years the xenophobia, nationalism, and racism that lies within our culture and our world. Our default response is more likely to be about policing borders than welcoming strangers. Without truly beginning to prepare at the *cultural level*, we will not succeed in preventing suffering or avoiding conflict. Fortunately, themes of hospitality and welcome are at the very core of the Biblical message, and widespread throughout the scriptures of the world religions. Harnessing the spiritual dimension of these themes will be crucial to the cultural work we must do to prepare our world for the time to come.

However, while themes of justice and mercy are central to Jesus' message, we seem at times to deflect away from his social critique to the level of personal morality. *This is a mistake*. If we equate Jesus' message solely with issues of morality and personal salvation, we have closed our eyes and ears to the message Jesus repeats over and over again. It is a *political* message—a core alignment of God's focus on issues of economic justice, political oppression, and social equity. If we don't understand and address the *structural* nature of sin and suffering in our world we do not understand the true gospel vision Jesus was proclaiming.

Sinners as Outsiders

Consider our reading this morning. In Matthew 9, we witness Jesus intentionally disrupting the social boundaries of his community. He dines with “tax collectors and sinners”, has contact with the woman suffering from hemorrhagic bleeding, and touches the girl who has died. All three of these are actions that would by the standards of his community make him impure. He would be expected to shun these people, or risk being contaminated with their sin. When asked, Jesus says “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

I desire mercy, not sacrifice. Jesus is quoting from the prophet Hosea and lifting up a central theme of God's revelation—an overturning of the unjust power relations that characterize so much of human history. He is aiming directly at the way in which religion is so often used to support these unjust power relations and proclaiming that God wants nothing to do with these

empty gestures of burnt offerings and clanging symbols. *What God wants is justice for the poor, protection for the vulnerable, mercy for the outcast.* ‘Go and learn what this means’, he proclaims.

But what does Jesus mean by this word ‘sinner’? Who is he talking about? It occurs multiple times in this passage. Matthew 9 says that “many tax collectors and sinners” came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. The Pharisees then inquire, using the same phrase—“why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners”.

Our default cultural reading is to interpret the word “sinner” to mean a person who is engaged in *immoral* behavior. We think of people who do bad things and hurt people. But when we read that Jesus was having dinner with “tax collectors and sinners”, this is not the point that is being made. In the context of Jesus’ community, the “sinners” he was dining with were not the immoral but the *outcasts* of society, those living *outside* the law—strangers, foreigners, the sick and lame, people who were not welcome, who were shunned, who were kept outside the protection of communal life. Their status meant that they did not keep temple rituals, which then became the perverse justification for their condemnation. They ate unclean food and did not offer the proper tithes to the religious authorities.

What’s important about this is that we read this passage and understand that the “sinners” Jesus was eating with were not immoral people but rather people who were unfairly shut out of the protection of their surrounding community, living on the margins, surviving by doing things others would not. Jesus’ focus was here, on this issue, overturning these oppressive structures and healing those who were wounded by them—lifting up the vision of the Kingdom of God as a place where there are no outcasts, where all are welcome, and where all can receive mercy and care and rest and belonging.

We must hear Jesus’ message as one of overturning social inequities. With outstretched hands, Jesus is responding to the outstretched hands of a wounded world, and the good news he was proclaiming was of the possibility for healing, justice, and restoration. When we ignore this dimension and focus our interpretation of sin as immorality requiring a

sacrifice to satisfy God's wrath, we are flattening the central message of Jesus, *which was to overturn this very idea*. Jesus saw sin as a *woundedness* in the human condition, a woundedness that separated people from wholeness, from intimacy, from love—from the Spirit of God that unites and connects all things. Redemption is not about being spared from punishment, redemption is about the healing process that brings about inter-personal, social, and spiritual restoration. We should not deny the inner transformation Jesus call us to, but we should understand the central meaning of this transformation as the healing of our wounds necessary to stop the cycle of harm. This is how we need to read the Gospel and understand its implications for us today.

Healing Redemption

In his book *The Wounded Heart of God* the Korean-American theologian Andrew Sung Park says “there is a fundamental problem in the Christian way of thinking about sin: it has been oriented almost exclusively to sinners.” “Christianity has been preoccupied,” he says, with sinners and oppressors but “has devoted little attention to their victims.” While it has “delineated a complete map” for the salvation of the wrong-doer, it has devoted “little or no theological analysis to the oppressed...The latter have been regarded simply as recipients of pity, compassion, and mercy.” As a result, he concludes: “The present form of the doctrine of sin is inadequate to diagnose and address the world's problems.”

To rectify this, Park introduces a traditional Korean concept of ‘han’ as being a necessary complement to our understanding of sin. ‘Han’ refers to the despair and hopelessness that can overwhelm those who face oppression or wrong-doing. Park believes that we need to see ‘sin’ and ‘han’ as twin sides of the human condition. When people fall into despair as a result of their situation, this can then manifest in negative ways. They can often then become oppressors themselves, acting in ways that wound others. There is a reciprocal relationship between ‘sin’ and ‘han’, between wrong-doing and being-harmed. We all know the phrase—“hurt people hurt people”—and this is a more profound spiritual truth than we realize.

This lens is important because it helps us to recover the power of Jesus’ message—which was not focused solely on the forgiveness of the wrong-

doer but *also* on the healing of the one who is wounded by them, knowing that many wrong-doers are also enmeshed in their own woundedness. To get out of the tangle of harm, the healing presence of divine grace is able to cut the knot, to heal the wounds—to welcome the excluded and restore the social order that has been perverted into injustice and oppression. This is the good news of the gospel and it begins with the breaking down of the walls that people erect to keep certain people out, separated from grace and hospitality. In the context of what we are facing, this is a message we must hear anew in our time.

When we look across the generations of human history, we see patterns of exclusion and oppression that manifest along various dimensions—gender, race, ethnicity and religion being some of the most prominent. The injustice of these patterns is matched only by the horror that comes from the war and conflict that arises in their wake, as ‘sin’ and ‘han’ blend together into mutual enmity and misery. This is the situation that humanity finds itself in and this is the situation that Jesus’ message of justice and radical hospitality is most directly pointing to.

These issues are upon us now and will become even more acute in the years ahead. When food and water systems become disrupted, when power grids fail, or oppressive heat or wildfire strikes, will we each retreat into the safety of our homes and leave others to live in temporary shelters in open spaces? Will we vote to build walls or open borders? We must prepare ourselves for the task of becoming communities of justice, of mercy, of structural welcome.

Now is the Time

Last time we were together, we spoke about what it means to have ‘eyes to see and ears to hear’. May our experience this week be a wakeup call that *now is the time*. We must see what is happening in our world and anticipate the challenges ahead. It is time to get involved in what it means to make the Kingdom of Heaven manifest here in our world, in our time. It is a place where all are invited to belong and to participate in the life of community. We must go forth with the outstretched hands of faith, knowing that we may find ourselves in situations in the future in which these hands may be outstretched to *receive* as well as to give. Either way, our prayer is that they

would find a pair of hands meeting them on the other side. “*Go and learn this,*” Jesus says: *‘I desire mercy. I have come for those who are wounded and need healing. Follow me. You are invited to join in the healing redemption of the world.’*

This is the message. This is the call. Let us learn to follow this way, the way of Jesus. Let us practice the faith of outstretched hands—offering mercy and finding it, for ourselves and for all.

Lord, hear our prayer.