

“Knowing the Way Home”

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On Friday, when my husband Brad was in this sanctuary speaking about his new biography of Rumi, many of you who knew me way back when I was on staff here in the late 90’s greeted me with a heart felt “Welcome home.” And I must say, it feels very good to be home.

I want to thank Pastor Tim, and Patrick, as well as my mentor Craig and his husband John, and the leadership of this church all of whom it possible for Brad and I to share in the life of this community this weekend. I also want to thank the choir for that beautiful piece this morning and for lifting all of us using the way of music, one of the most immediate mystical practices that brings us in communion with the Divine.

Today I am thinking especially of Dr. Romney, whose legacy persists, in the spirit of welcome in this place, as well as in the largess that bears his name and allowed me to be here this morning. Dr. Romney was the first Christian mystic that I spent any time with. My first meeting with Rod happened when I was visiting Seattle First Baptist Church, right out of Seminary, through an invitation by Craig and Companis to see if there might be a placement for me here. Pastor Romney, tall, even for me, greeted me as I climbed out of the car in front of the church by looking into my eyes and saying: “I’ve admired your family since before I was born.” What do you say to that?

So how wonderful that I am preaching with the memory of Rod Romney in this pulpit; mingling with the lingering spiritual wisdom from our Friday night conversation about the Sufi mystic and poet, Rumi. We have prepared our hearts and spirits well to receive the scripture passage from John, so beautifully read by Margaret.

John is the most mystical of the Gospels. In Luke we have been introduced to the prophetic Jesus whose words and deeds ring out with a clarion call for justice and liberation for the poor and the oppressed. In John’s Gospel we are invited to know the mystical Jesus, who calls each of us to an intimate knowledge and oneness with God.

Jesus invites us to know God, describing himself as the Way and the Truth and the Life. Jesus says: "I am in God and God is in me." Those familiar with mystical poetry and literature will recognize these refrains. They are echoed by Rumi and his contemporaries: the Sufis mystics Hallaj and Bestami. With the Sufis, saying 'I am the Truth', or 'Glory be to me' was often interpreted as blasphemous and idolatry. But none of them intended it that way, rather it was their way of conveying the experience of a radical communion with God,

This is how we are meant to understand Jesus's words to his disciples, and is the way to understand Jesus himself. In Jesus, the combining of the Divine and human is complete. Jesus is mysticism taken to its final conclusion of complete union and consciousness of God. And Jesus invites us to follow on the path of the mystical Christ.

My great-grandfather, Walter Rauschenbusch, another mystical Christian to whom Dr. Romeny was referring when he talked about admiring my family, wrote about Jesus as (Quote) a "new type" of human, who saw human beings through the spiritually charged atmosphere and point of view of God." (Unquote)

For many Christians, this morning's reading has provided ammunition to proclaim that Christianity is the only way to God, and that we are called to superimpose an external Jesus upon our heart and lives. Yet, I am proposing that to understand Jesus as the way is to invite Jesus to be our guide as we make the life-long sojourn to encounter and embrace the Divine that is within each one of us. Jesus invites us to the kingdom of God that is within.

Following Jesus does not negate the uniqueness of every human being. Like stained Glass or a Kaleidoscope, God shines through each of us in all the difference shapes, and colors that we represent and which, collectively, light up our world. The spiritual task of the mystic is to clean from our hearts and spirits all that serves to separate us from the love that is God. In a homey metaphor, our spiritual path consists of the hard yet gratifying work of cleaning the caked on muck and mire that we have accumulated on the glass that is obscuring the Divine light.

These can be our experiences of hurt, neglect or separation; it can be the negative things we tell ourselves about who we are and what we can accomplish, endemic racism or sexism that pervades our world that we know is false, but yet has hardened and restricted our spirit, it can even be religious teachings that told us that we were less than, or removed from or outside of God's love. Each of us knows those things that can serve to keep the light dim within us, and serve to separate and divide us from full communion with one another and with God.

Jesus calls us to wash it all away so that we can let our lights shine and dwell with God.

And as Jesus reminds us in today's scripture, In God's home there are many dwellings, with plenty of space for all of us of every faith, race, size, age, orientation, gender and culture to gather, finding joy and connection and power in our collective union with one another, and with God.

And so today, I would like to invite you to an altar call within your own heart. Jesus is calling you to come home to that deep place within you where we become one with God.

Yet equally important is the altar call to the world. Because the power of this deep mystical alignment with God is made real when we live it out in the world.

Some of you may remember Michelle Obama's inspiring line, "When they go low, we go high." This imperative still holds true. Yet in the days after the election I met with a pastor who made an addition that I feel is important for the living of these days. She said: "When they go low, we go high – and then we go Deep."

In this crisis moment in our nation, we all need to go deep. This has been a difficult time and has knocked many of us down, but we will not go out. Instead we will go deep into the well of love and life-giving power that comes with our oneness with God.

I came to know Rumi well over the last eight years while Brad was researching his life. The time in which Rumi lived was even more

chaotic and devastating than our own. All the towns and cities of his childhood were completely leveled by Ghangis Khan and the Mongols whose killing amounted to genocide of the greater Persian community. Baghdad was laid to waste and the Caliph, who was both the king and the pope of the Muslim world, was put into a cloth sack and trampled by horses. Many in Rumi's time believed that it was truly the end of the world, as they knew it. On the personal side, Rumi suffered from the death of his first wife and the devastating separation from his beloved Shams of Tabriz. Yet despite of, indeed, BECAUSE of, all of this upheaval, Rumi's loving communion with God grew stronger. He sang and danced and composed the poetry that we love today, and that still rings with the ecstatic joy that Rumi experienced even within the heartbreak that was all around him.

The lesson for our time is that we must also go deep into the place of creativity, love and joy even within this dire moment. We will go deep and reach out to one another to grow a network of lie-and-authoritarian resistant roots that are watered, nurtured and strengthened by the Divine source of all being that is love.

One of my colleagues where I work named Lisa Anderson, developed a program called the Sojourner Truth Leadership Circle that focuses on resilience and what she calls prophetic self-care, especially for women of color who have too often sacrificed their own wellbeing in service of others.

Recently she launched a new cohort made of Trans women of color who are active in social justice movements in the American south. For that group of women who society attempts to marginalize on all sides, the most radical act right now is to double down on love and joy.

In their first meeting they shared their stories and became known to one another as they danced and laughed and sang and did death-drops - - nurturing the love they have for one another and for themselves so that their roots of love go so deep that the winds of hate and discrimination will not be able to blow them down. They are determined not to let anyone take their joy and I commend their example to all of us, as we love fiercely in this time.

We are called to go deep to do this work of loving resistance and repair that this time requires. We can march, we can petition, we can protest – and we must do these things to protect ourselves and the most vulnerable in our society. Yet to do that well, means that we must go deep and know that we are in communion with the God of Justice who is intimately with us and in us.

May we all follow the way of Jesus who invites us go deep within ourselves until we find ourselves in communion with the Divine. There we will all meet one another, see one another for the Divine creatures we really are. Collectively we will shine as beacons for justice, and together, we will find our way home to heaven – here on earth.