

Who Shall Abide in God's Sanctuary?

Rev. Wendy Jean MacLean,
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Wall Street United Church

Psalm 15

*God, there are so many things in our world that trouble me.
I feel anger surge up in me when I hear the news.
My inner voice is not gentle. I rage against the injustice and violence
of our world these days. I try to listen to both sides of the story
but my heart will not let me believe lies.
When what we see contradicts the lies being perpetrated
to maintain a system rooted in oppression and racism,
God have mercy. Christ have mercy. Kyrie Eleison.*

*Whisper tenderly, Word of Life,
to counter the shouting and noise of a violent world.
Tune our ears to your word, to the love that surrounds us,
to the body of Christ made known in community, earth and life itself.
Be in my words, may they be true and faithful to the gospel.
And may our understandings be a blessing to you. AMEN*

Today is St. Brigid's Day, a holiday weekend in Ireland. If this was St. Patrick's Day, I would probably be looking out at a sea of green, since most people seem to find a bit of Irish blood in their history around March 17! Ireland finally recognized the need to honour a much-loved Celtic woman saint, and what a saint she is!

Brigit was a powerful leader, a healer, a mystic in fifth century Ireland. When she wanted land for a monastery in Kildare, she went to the King. He was not pleased with her leadership. "I am only asking for as much my cloak will cover," she explained. That didn't sound too demanding. But when she spread her great, green cloak, it spread and spread and spread — covering enough land for the monastery!

Brigid was a patron saint of midwives and blacksmiths. She is associated with fire and with holy wells.

My great-grandfather was a blacksmith, and his son, my grandfather, learned the trade. But times changed, the depression came, and my grandmother wanted to move to the city. No blacksmith was needed.

In some ways, following Jesus is like learning a trade. Jesus calls his students “*disciples*”. A disciple is an apprentice to a master teacher. We are apprenticed for life to Jesus, always learning and growing. Always making mistakes and needing help—forgiveness or inspiration, direction, support. Sometimes we want to give up, but our teacher doesn’t give up on us. We are “practicing” Christians.

As apprentices to Jesus, as teachers and storytellers, we have to learn how to speak the truth from our hearts. This is a skill as well as a blessing. When I see hundreds of clergy kneeling in peace, and thousands of people singing in the bitter cold, I am inspired to practice. Being together today, my friends, is one way we practice our faith.

These days, even in the coldest time of year, it seems like our world is on fire. When I listen to the lies being tossed around in the news, I feel the fury inside me. What do we do with this anger? We can learn from the blacksmith: ‘*When your soul is on fire, use prayer to forge something useful. Make tools to heal our world.*’ Prayer is a way of defying the narrative of the world. In prayer we envision an alternative future. “Thy kingdom come,” we pray.

Theologian Walter Wink reminds us that prayer is not like sending a letter to the White House (or Parliament Hill, or City Hall)! “***When we pray, we are engaged in an act of co-creation.***” We are part of a force-field that changes the whole as it changes one part. He describes it as a “vibratory centre that radiates the power of the universe.” (The Powers That Be. p. 185)

Jesus tells us: ***Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*** In our Meditation group we explored what “purity of heart” might mean. The group shared their wisdom: “Being non-judgmental”, “knowing we are forgiven”, “giving and receiving understanding.”

In Psalm 15, the poet asks: ***Who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?*** This is a question we continue to ask ourselves in the 21st century: Who is in and who isn't? Who is welcome in this country? Who has citizenship? Who belongs? ***“Those who walk blamelessly and do what is right and speak the truth from their heart.”***

How do we speak from the heart when we are angry and hurt? How do we speak truth when the lies around us are so loud?

I have a problem.

When I listen to the news, a polite response might start with *“What a jerk!”* It gets worse. Some of you might have other names or expressions that spring to your lips when you watch what is unfolding in this very troubled world. This name-calling isn't just directed at south of the border. A Brockville city councilor said someone in the crowd yelled at her: *“You're a pig!”* This kind of talk dehumanizes the person being heckled. AND it dehumanizes the person yelling because they have clearly forgotten their shared humanity.

A dear friend (may she rest in peace) used to say, “When I open my mouth a brick falls out.” She was always frank. She never sweetened anything with soft talk or flattery. Sometimes the things she said had a bite. But she had a saving grace: she was a very faithful person. She spoke the truth from her heart. A very good heart. A pure heart.

One practice for speaking the truth from our hearts is “sacred conversation.” In sacred conversation, we draw from the place in our soul—our inner self—that is rooted in God. (We don't earn God's place in our souls, we are created with it, made in the image of God. We can ignore it or deny it, but it is there because all life is filled with God's presence.)

Speaking from the heart is not the same as being “nice”. Speaking truth is hard. But it is not violent or abusive. We are called to draw our words from the source of

love. In the gospel of John, Jesus is called "*the Word.*" We echo this word in our sacred conversation.

Before we speak, we pause to notice our body: are we tight, braced as if ready for a battle? This is a sign that we need to go deeper, until we connect with that goodness that dwells—abides—in us. "*Jesus Christ have mercy*" is an ancient prayer that helps us by-pass the noise until we connect with the love.

Jewish theologian Martin Buber proposed that there are two attitudes toward existence: I-it and I-Thou.

When we relate to someone (or a group/culture/gender) in an impersonal manner, as if they are an object, this is an *I-it mode*. Sadly, we hear this far too often, when immigrants and refugees and people of colour are grouped together as if they are indistinguishable.

But I am also guilty. When I watch certain speakers or leaders, I find it easy to slip into this I-it mode. The mechanism of propaganda is always based on dehumanizing "the other/the enemy" as IT. This contrasts with the I-Thou mode of relating.

Those of us who learned French in school learned the difference between the familiar form of you "*Tu*" and the formal form of "*Vous.*" I was surprised when I found that in French, God is always referred to in the familiar form: "tu"! This is the equivalent of Thou. In Quaker communities, people used "thee" and "thou" to express friendship and belonging.

I wonder how different we would feel after watching the news if we said (instead of 'YOU JERK'): "I disagree with Thee." Our modern English translations of the Bible took out the subtle distinctions between "You" and "Thou". During the Reformation, a collection of Protestant clergy, exiled to Geneva, had translated the Bible for Protestants. The notes in the margins of the Geneva Bible included the endorsement "*to disobey a tyrant.*" King James, the Catholic King of England, commissioned a new translation of the Bible in the English of the time. Many people still hold up the King James translation of the Bible as if it was written by God, not people. But the King James translation, so loved, was commissioned

because the king wanted a more passive version to justify keeping his subjects submissive. King James regarded the notes as “seditious” and “traytorous”.

Early in his ministry, Jesus offers a list of qualities and behaviors that bring a special kind of happiness called “blessing”. In the Beatitudes, Jesus offers a worldview, which lifts up the poor, the humble, the merciful, the seekers, the peacemakers—people who are underdogs in the scheme of valuation based on power and economic prowess.

Jesus does not tell us to be nice. Jesus calls us to be peacemakers, to tell the truth, to stand up against injustice. *‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.’*

Jesus shows us a way. It is not the way of passive acceptance. It is not the way of violent resistance. We guard our anger, like a blacksmith guards their flame, so that it points to truth.

We are co-creating a new day. We are part of the transformation of our world into something we can’t yet see, but which we long for. Artists and poets and musicians and actors are using their creativity to break the cycle of violence with songs and skits that point to a new day. They laugh! What kind of crazy weapon is Canada’s national response to threat? Elbows? Elbows up?

Legend tells us that in a time of conflict and dispute, Saint Brigid caused enough confusion that she fooled each side into thinking they had won. The conflict ended without an armed battle. Imagine if we could just lull everyone into a gentle sense of victory that ended all the battles and aggression happening in our world! Sadly, we are more easily lulled into a sense of hopelessness or helplessness.

We do not have that luxury. As Christians we MUST act. But how?

We are watching our world pushing and groaning in the pangs of labour.

Something new is being born. Don’t lose hope. There are times when we must cry out, and times to breathe. Brigid was said to have travelled back 5 hundred years, to be the midwife helping Mary when she gave birth to Jesus.

Today, let us take our place as midwives, gathered in faith, helping to birth a new day. The world needs us. With God's grace, may our prayers and acts of love cover the world, like Brigid's green cape. AMEN

Resources:

Conversation—the Sacred Art. Diane M. Millis. (Skylight Paths) 2013

The Powers That Be. Walter Wink. (Doubleday Galilee)1998

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction. Eugene Peterson. (IVP) 2000

Illuminating the Way, Embracing the Wisdom of Monks and Mystics. Christine Valters Paintner. (Sorin Books) 2016

Praying With Celtic Holy Women. Bridget Mary Meehan and Regina Madonna Oliver. (Liguori/Triumph) 2003