

Sermon: Sunday, May 26, 2019 – Psalm 67, John 1:1-5, 14
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

One of the deep theological questions that I get asked about my Sabbatical, is “how did you end up going to Arizona Spring Training instead of Florida Spring Training, since the Toronto Blue Jays train in Florida?”

The answer is two-fold: first, I found a retreat centre just north of Scottsdale, Arizona, where I could spend a few days, and I really liked the sense of balancing my days between watching baseball, and quiet contemplative time in a desert setting. But second, at the end of March, just after the baseball was ending, there was a conference in Albuquerque NM entitled *The Universal Christ*, and Shannon and I had yearned to attend such an event for years.

The organizer of this event was the Centre for Action and Contemplation, the organization built around the work of Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan contemplative and progressive theologian whose daily emails are familiar to many of you in this congregation (<https://cac.org/sign-up/>). The speakers were John Dominic Crossan, experienced and impassioned author of many books including some co-authored with Marcus Borg; Rev Jacqui Lewis, a smart, fiery pastor whose work is deeply embedded in social justice and congregational life; and, of course, Richard Rohr. 2,300 of us gathered in table groups at the Albuquerque Convention Centre for this four day event, with attendees from all 50 U.S. states and 15 other nations, including a fair number of Canadians. The event was also live-streamed to 2,800 house groups and Church groups in more than 40 nations. I share those numbers, as a bit of an indication that the ideas presented by Richard Rohr are gaining traction. In a time when mainline Church interest is dwindling throughout North America, the interest in these kinds of ideas is on the rise.

And what, precisely, are “these kinds of ideas?” Well, one sermon certainly isn't going to cover it, so you can anticipate a study series this fall, probably eight sessions, going through Father Richard's just-released book, *The Universal Christ*. So what I'm going to do instead, is take one paragraph from *The Universal Christ* and try to unpack it enough to introduce a couple of its key concepts. And as we delve into this rather dense material, my hope is in line with that of the author, that you will process these words not just with your intellect, but with your body, your experiences, your hopes for the world, your sense of who you are and who God is in that world.

We've all been at weddings featuring the beautiful hymn to love, in 1st Corinthians 13: “love is patient, love is kind”, and so on. That scripture is at the culmination of an exploration of the various spiritual gifts, and which are most important, and at the end Paul whittles it down to the famous three: “Now Faith, Hope, and Love abide these three; and the greatest of these is Love.” (1 Cor 13: 13) Keep that idea in mind, as we hear these words from Richard Rohr:

“Faith, hope and love are the very nature of God, and thus the nature of all Being. Each of these Three Great Virtues must always include the other two in order to be authentic: love is always hopeful and faithful, hope is always loving and faithful, and faith is always loving and hopeful. They are the very nature of God and thus of all Being. Such wholeness is personified in the cosmos as Christ, and in human history as Jesus. So God is not just love but also absolute faithfulness and hope itself. And the energy of this faithfulness and hope flows out from the Creator toward all created beings”.

– Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, p. 25

The first line I'm going to break out of that paragraph is the first line, which is reiterated mid-paragraph: “**Faith, hope and love are the very nature of God, and thus the nature of all Being.**”

Rohr values science every bit as much as religion, so when we talk about the relationship between God and the whole natural order, we're not doing so in a traditional “old man in the sky creates the world in six days” sort of way. But neither are we separating the world and, indeed, the cosmos, from the infinite ground of being we know as God. All of creation is understood by Rohr as being intimately connected to the heart of God, and capable of revealing something about the nature of

God. There is no separation here, between a God who is isolated in a distant heaven, and humans who live some sort of depraved existence far away from God. There is intimacy here, bonds that cannot be broken. The Psalms, such as the 67th Psalm which we heard this morning, yearn for God to be understood broadly by all the world, and our indigenous sisters and brothers speak of all creatures, plants, stones, humans, being “all my relations” because we are all related through the Creator. That’s the baseline for Rohr’s concept as well: if we can accept that an infinite reality – which we know as God – is the source of all that we see, then we need only take one more step to believe that all that is created by God contains the goodness of God. Or to come back to our quote, **“Faith, hope and love are the very nature of God, and thus the nature of all Being.”**

For any who grew up with the understanding that human life is completely estranged from God and humanity is basically bad, it’s hard to do a 180 and understand all of creation, all humans, all life, having God in their DNA. But that’s exactly what this says. (cf. p. 22, “All creatures must in some way carry the divine DNA of their creator.”) After each stage of the Genesis 1 creation story, God sees and declares that what has been created is GOOD. Not just “yeah, well done if I do say so myself” but GOOD in the same way that God is good. The family resemblance between the Creator and the Created, is the way that the very essence of God, expressed through faith, hope and love, is mirrored by all we see.

Rather than seeing “redemption” as the big task of our Christian story, if we see the world as good and “of God” then the task of the human journey could be seen as “recognition” – *embracing* God’s own fundamental goodness, in myself, in my neighbour, in the earth we continue to abuse and plunder. Recognition, and “reunion” – having recognized the goodness, then coming back into healthy relationship with all people and all of nature. Let’s hold this thought in mind in these coming Sundays, as we examine what it will mean for our congregation to become an Affirming congregation, committed to an ongoing agenda of being truly welcoming and truly inviting: for if we understand all people and indeed all creation as bearing God’s glorious image, how could we possibly desire anything other than a wider, more inclusive circle?

Building on that first idea, of the nature or character of God being exhibited in all creation, is a key sentence in the middle of the paragraph: **“Such wholeness is personified in the cosmos as Christ, and in human history as Jesus.”**

Our gospel reading this morning, the first words written in the gospel of John, speak of this mystical connection between the person of Jesus and the pre-existing Christ, spoken of by John as “Logos” or, “the Word.” “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” says John (1:1), who then goes on to say (1:14), “and the Word became flesh” (i.e. Jesus) and dwelt among us.” Jesus Christ, traditionally understood as fully human and fully divine – not half and half, but fully both – is here understood as the one who bridges the creation of the universe, and the expression of love in human lives. *As Christ*, Jesus Christ was always part of that love-based connection with the cosmos, and *as Jesus of Nazareth*, Jesus Christ showed us what it would mean for humans to really *own* that goodness, and trust that goodness more than we trust greed or selfishness. The Christ of the cosmos bears the gift of love for all eternity, for all peoples, for all of life; and those of us who are embedded in the Christian story see that same love-gift embodied in Jesus.

This connection of Jesus and Christ is the heart of The Universal Christ – the conference, the book, the worldview. In the book (pp. 6-7), Rohr quotes G.K Chesterton who wrote, “*Your religion is not the church you belong to, but the cosmos you live inside of*” and Rohr goes on from that quote to say, “*Once we know that the entire physical world around us, all of creation, is both the hiding place and the revelation place for God, this world becomes home, safe, enchanted, offering grace to any who look deeply.*” That is such a profound statement for us in the year 2019, that I’d like to pause for a moment, to take a breath and just ponder.

In a world where nation after nation is seeing the development of ultra-nationalist movements, based on a strict, narrowing definition of who “we” are and the defense of “our” nation from the unruly

outsiders known as “them,” Christ is exactly the opposite. The creative, healing, loving intent of God-in-Christ is present with all and in all, whether we acknowledge it or not. So every step we take toward a worldview, or a religious doctrine, that narrows our understanding of who is “in” and who is “out,” is a step away from our true nature, a step away from God, a step away from the loving embrace of The Universal Christ. As this morning’s key paragraph says about the loving God’s relationship with the world, **“the energy of this faithfulness and hope flows out from the Creator toward all created beings”**. The energy flow of love, so well understood by our healing pathway team here at Ralph Connor as they help individuals be restored to balance, is nothing less than the life of God coming alive in us. This is who God is, this is where God is found: in the way that we are beloved of God, and the way that we recognize and celebrate that in every living being.

There is one final concept from the paragraph that I’d like to lift up, before we finish this introduction. **“Each of these Three Great Virtues must always include the other two in order to be authentic: love is always hopeful and faithful, hope is always loving and faithful, and faith is always loving and hopeful.”**

These words remind us once more, of how dynamic God is. Elsewhere, Rohr develops his doctrine of the Trinity and it involves a wonderful, tumbling interplay between the holy three, and I see that same motion in this relationship between faith, hope and love. This part of Rohr’s concept also gives us some work to do. Drawn to a God whose goodness is seen everywhere, and committed to follow in the path of Jesus Christ, *how would I see my life* being hopeful, faithful, and loving? How can *this congregation* embody and exhibit those same qualities, as we express Christ’s mission in the community and world? Figuring out the answers to those questions, is something that “will happen in the doing”, and I invite you to that path. *Open* your faith, so it becomes loving and hopeful; *ground* your hope, in faithfulness and love; *understand* God’s own love, not as a duty to “the other”, but as a process of becoming more fully human, a human fueled by faithfulness and hope.

This morning barely scratches the surface of Richard Rohr’s book, *The Universal Christ*. I have questions of the author, to be sure: questions for clarification, for parts I don’t understand; questions of breadth, where I’m not sure he has considered the depth of some people’s plights or the full shape of their beliefs. But those questions are overwhelmed by the *gratitude* I have, for the opportunity to attend the Conference, and for the way that the book and Conference have deepened my understanding of things I have always believed to be true but had never really heard validated so clearly.

I also am thankful beyond words, for the knowledge that many of you back here in Canmore were already eager to hear about these concepts even before the Conference started. We got the impression that many of the folks at the Conference would come to the annual gatherings put on by the Centre for Action and Contemplation every year to get a bit of a “recharge,” but would then go back home and just kind of swallow what they had learned, without a community or a congregation that wanted to be challenged in these ways. What a gift to be able to come back here, to a place that already embodies so much of what we heard in Albuquerque! With that gift, though, also comes a challenge: because of that openness to be the Body of Christ in new ways, and because our Ralph Connor Mission Statement speaks of being “an intentionally inviting Christian community that seeks, welcomes and embraces” others, we have to keep moving outward. In the way we relate to the community around us, and our understanding of our capacity to really be a progressive community of faith, let’s not imagine that our mission is little, for the God whose mission it really is, is anything but small.

For the gift of life, for the opportunity to reach beyond our usual limits, for a universe pulsating with faith, hope, and love: thanks be to God, Amen.

Reference cited:

Rohr, Richard. *The Universal Christ*. NYC: Convergent, 2019.

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