

A shorter version was delivered at Faith Lutheran Church, March 15, 2017

Some of you know that I meet regularly with a group of liberal clergy here in Chico. We gather at Bidwell Perk for an hour on Wednesday afternoons. On any Wednesday, our group may be only 2, or as many as 7, depending on what in our ministries is pressing on that day. We are mostly Christian, with myself and Sara Abrams, the Rabbi of Congregation Beth Israel, being the exceptions. Our conversation ranges from politics, national, local and church, to theology, to problems that we all face as pastors. We tease each other about our theologies and poke fun at ourselves.

Father Mike was talking recently about the sect of the Roman Catholic church that still adheres to reciting the mass in Latin. "And we all know that Jesus spoke Latin," he added. For those whose early church history may be a bit rusty, Jesus spoke Aramaic. Ted, who is American Baptist, chimed in with a comment relating to the Southern Baptists, who still use the King James version of the Bible. "Yes," said Ted, "and God speaks in King James English."

I feel blessed to have been welcomed into this group, and since I joined in 2015, soon after I arrived in Chico, we have welcomed two new members, the recently installed Ben Colahan at Faith Lutheran and Sara at Beth Israel. Other regular attendees include Ted Sanders, recently retired from First Baptist, Jim Peck of the United Church of Christ, Jesse Kearns, his wife Mary (an ordained chaplain) and Katy Valentine, all of First Christian Church. Mike Newman, a semi-retired Catholic priest, rounds out our group.

The Christian members of this group regularly participate in interfaith worship. They do this on Christmas eve and they hold Wednesday evening services together during the season of Lent, the 40 days of preparation leading to the celebration of Easter. They also hold a combined Good Friday service. The clergy take turns presiding over Wednesday evening worship, held at Faith Lutheran. To

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make a long explanation longer, I was invited this year to preside at one of the Lenten services. I nervously accepted.

One of my mentors is a retired Presbyterian minister, Mary Lynn Tobin. In the week prior to the service I would lead, I was speaking with her about it. What did I have to say to a Christian gathering anticipating the joy and renewal of the risen Christ on Easter? While I am a student of Jesus and of the Bible, I do not think of myself as Christian. Although I was raised Episcopalian, I left that church when I was 14. It was not until I was exposed to the denomination in which I am now ordained, Unitarian Universalism, that I felt like I had found a spiritual home. I was 30.

My mentor wisely pointed out that Lent is a season of the year when Christians really focus on relationship with the spirit, with God; of reconciliation with God. This was something I could talk about without trying to be an expert in a tradition that is not mine. Christians focus on relationship with God through Jesus. In other religious traditions, and also within Christianity, place--physical location--can be important in relationship with Spirit.//

I have recently discovered backcountry skiing after a lifetime of alpine skiing at resorts. This is not cross-country skiing on long skinny skis with no edges. I've also done that much of my life. This is putting on gear that enables you to enter the backcountry, places where you hike in the summer, ascending peaks under your own power. You are away from the crowds and the sound of ski lifts. You are also away from readily available help if you get yourself into trouble. You enter a vast landscape of snow and mountains. I made just such a foray on a recent weekend just prior to my preaching gig at Faith Lutheran.

My wife, stepson and I put on our boots and skis at the car. We were soon climbing the gentle grade of a railroad maintenance access road west of Donner

Pass. The snow had refrozen overnight, and our skis rasped loudly as we moved over snow cat tracks on the road. We finally crossed the railroad tracks and moved now on undisturbed but crusty snow. Our tracks were barely discernible, our passage noisy. Not for today was a quiet passage through soft fresh powder. This was springtime skiing, sometimes on ice, sometimes on mush, sometimes on perfect. We climbed on through a world of white and brown and green. The trees became smaller and more sparse as we gained elevation. The snow was impossibly deep.

After two hours of climbing, we summited a knoll that gave us a 360 degree view of a vast winter wilderness. Our view in most directions was circumscribed by peaks ten or more miles away, but to the west there was a gap through which we could see Snow Mountain in the coast range, more than 100 miles from us. Out came the cameras to record what we were seeing, hoping to recapture later, through pictures, some of what we were feeling. I had left my monkey mind somewhere on the slopes below, you know, the one that chatters on endlessly about this, that and the other thing. I was filled with joy at being in the high country. I wondered at the beauty of creation. I wondered at the hibernating wilderness, being renewed by life giving snow after years of drought. The temperature soared into the 60's and snowmelt trickled into the earth many feet below us.

Being in nature is a way that I have experienced renewal wonder since I was quite young. As a boy, I spent days wandering the woods near my home. Often I did the things that young boys like to do when given the opportunity, skip rocks, wade in the stream, swing on vines, catch salamanders. At other times, when I was by myself, I would be still, observing, listening to the birds, sometimes holding conversations with them, or so I liked to think. Like Thoreau, about whom we

heard a few weeks ago, I would go to the woods to reflect on what was important, what was real.

Marcus Borg, the late New Testament scholar, speaks of "thin places" in the conclusion of the book *The Meaning of Jesus*, coauthored with N.T. Wright. It is a term used in Celtic Christianity to describe places where the boundary between the physical world and the spiritual world becomes "soft and permeable, the veil becomes diaphanous and sometimes lifts."ⁱ Places like this are not unique to the Celts as we heard in our story today. They are present throughout the world for earth-centered religions in cultures that have deep and ancient connections to the land. A thin place is present for Jews in the sacred Western Wall in Jerusalem, all that is left of the 2nd Temple, destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. They are present for Moslems at Mecca and the Dome of the Rock, built on Temple Mount, the site of the 2nd Jewish Temple. The early Christian fathers went to the desert to be closer to God.

John Philip Newell, the Celtic Christian theologian, gave a workshop last year at Davis Community Church in my former home town. He spoke of thin places and of his association with Ghost Ranch in the high desert of New Mexico. Ghost Ranch is an education and retreat center owned by the Presbyterian Church. Newell is Companion Theologian for the American Spirituality Center at Ghost Ranch. It is a place made famous in paintings by Georgia O'Keefe who captured the amazing light, the spiritual light, on canvas. Ghost Ranch is a thin place, dating back many hundreds, if not thousands of years in the cultures of native peoples of that area.

Several years ago I was an adult leader on a service trip to the Navajo reservation near the Grand Canyon. We were taught how their historic land is bounded by four mountains, mountains that are sacred, that are thin places for them

in their connection with Spirit. In our story today, we heard about how the Black Hills are sacred to the Sioux Indians, and how they fought to preserve that sacred land. For them, the Black Hills are a thin place. We also heard about how Black Elk had a very powerful vision about relationship between peoples and how to help his people while he was sick. Illness, too, can make the border between the everyday and the spiritual more diaphanous.

Borg refers to Christ as creating "thin place" through his ministry in Galilee 2000 years ago. The stories and practices of Christianity have created "thin place" for billions of believers ever since. So, too, we hope to create thin place here on Sunday mornings. Whether or not you believe in God or Creator or Spirit, with a capital "S", when your worship leaders do things right, when you are receptive, when we are lucky, we create thin space here. We are moved. We feel closer to our neighbors. We gain insight or healing. Maybe it's our sharing in community. Maybe it's the music. Maybe it's the story or the reading. Maybe it is even my sermon.

I concluded with these words when I preached at Faith Lutheran three weeks ago. 'Today we come together in Ecumenical and Interfaith Worship in the belief that Spirit is accessible in many different ways. If we have done our work well, and we have been receptive, we have created thin space here together this evening.'
(And this morning.)

May it be so.

¹ Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*. Harper One, NY, 1999. 250.