

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
 13 May, 2012

**“... And shall the earth
 seem all of paradise that we shall know?”¹**
for Rev. Rebecca Heather Froom

Poet Wallace Stevens asks, “... And shall the earth // Seem all of paradise that we shall know?” That would be a resounding *Yes!* We say, All that we can know of heaven and hell is right here. It's up to us to throw our weight, mightily, to the possibility of “on earth as it is in heaven” – to give ourselves to love, service, justice, and peace.

I want to reflect with you today on building spiritual community, as we ordain Rebecca to answer the call to that good work.

To be called to serve as a religious leader sounds so exalted, but it is more like the white lotus flower that blooms from the mud. What underlies the avocation to mine the longing for the beloved community and build of us something greater, together, than we could ever be alone, may well be nothing more – and nothing less – than *loneliness*. In that heartbreaking and heartbroken desert of loneliness lie the seeds of our mission, and our redemption.

Six months ago, Air Force surgeon major Dolly Skeete was deployed to serve in Afghanistan for six months, leaving her husband and three young sons, including a 5-month-old infant. Thankfully, she has just returned home, and, appropriately, much has been made of Dr. Dolly Skeete's sacrifice, and of the costs to her children. On this Mothers Day we think of her, and the one hundred thousand mothers who, since 2001, have left their children to serve in our good name. But it was her husband, emergency room doctor Larry Skeete, the one who manned the home front in his wife's absence, whose poignant comment took my breath away. Speaking for so many left behind, he said, “I was profoundly lonely.”²

1 Wallace Stevens, from *Sunday Morning, III*

2 Champ Clark and Susan Keating, “When Mom Comes Home From War,” in *People* magazine, May 7, 2012, p. 154

And what of the even more pervasive loneliness, the frighteningly ordinary loneliness of the times in which we live, festering, as it is, in the displacement of the extended family, the scattering of the village, and the misuse of technology?

Author Stephen Marche calls it “the great paradox of our age.” We live in a technological “web of connection” in which we can reach everyone we know and many more we don't know in a nanosecond, *yet* “we have never been more detached from one another, or lonelier.” So-called “connectivity” – texts, tweeting, and Facebook – finds thirty-five percent of adults over forty-five chronically lonely, up fifteen percent from a decade ago. Twenty percent of North Americans – sixty million people – are unhappy in their lives because of loneliness.

Stephen Marche equates social media with “a fighting retreat from the messy reality of other people.” Technology lures us, he says, into “increasingly superficial connections, at exactly the same moment [it makes] avoiding the mess of human interaction easy.” We avoid the mess, we might add, and the blessings. Between 1985 and 2004, even before Facebook, the average North American's close confidantes shrank in number from three to one; one in four reported having *zero* close friends.³

Now, almost anywhere we find ourselves, we can look up from our touch screens to see other people looking down at theirs. We are together, but alone. “Social” media are turning us into solitary creatures. Author Sherry Turkle writes, “sips” of online connection provide only “the illusion of companionship.” She suggests that we put down our devices, “look at one another, and ... start the conversation.”⁴

Which brings us back to church. Literally.

Recently, I was sitting with an interfaith group of colleagues, one of whom was bemoaning the fact of a person with difficult behavior who has been disrupting her church. We all nodded, knowingly. “Wouldn't it be great just to hand-pick your people?” someone asked. We all nodded, dreamily. And then someone said, “Yes, but then *it wouldn't be church.*”

It wouldn't be church without all the messiness and disappointment of belonging. It wouldn't be church without all the exaltation and thrill of belonging. *It wouldn't be church* without the commitment to love, service, justice, and peace, without the opportunities –

³ Stephen Marche, “Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?” *The Atlantic*, May, 2012

⁴ Sherry Turkle, *New York Times*

sometimes in disguise – to grow our souls.

We cannot be reminded often enough of the story from G.I. Gurdjieff's spiritual community in France, where the students were driven to distraction by an old man who was hot-tempered, slovenly, and unwilling to help in any way. One day, after yet another blow-up, the man stormed off and drove away. The students celebrated.

Gurdjieff, however, took off for Paris in hot pursuit, hell-bent on convincing the man to return. But he had made up his mind, the man said; he was finished. After long negotiations, Gurdjieff offered to pay him a very large monthly stipend to take up residence again. How could he refuse?

When he returned and walked in on what was essentially his *bon voyage* and good riddance party, the other students were appalled. When they learned he would be paid to stay, while they were in fact paying dearly to be there, they were up in arms.

G.I. Gurdjieff called together the community, listened carefully to their complaints, and laughed. “This man is like yeast for bread,” he explained. “Without him here, you would never really learn about ... anger, patience, and compassion. That is why you pay me, and why I hire him.”⁵

The opportunity for spiritual refinement is a bonus. Shared philosophy and theology – values and politics – are a bonus. What really matters in the foxhole of loneliness is the experience of *belonging*. And at the heart of it all is the feeling of being *of use*. Here is anonymous testimony:

“I tell you,” she says, “I would have died but for the friendships.

“[I was really sick.] The doctors had just about given up. Forget it for having any will to live. I can't begin to describe the despair. Beyond the relentless physical pain, there was this utter emptiness of heart and soul. Each morning felt like waking up in hell....

“And yet people came and called and cared and stayed. And each gesture came to feel almost miraculous to me. And there were moments when I would say, 'You just don't know what this means to me.'

5 Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, eds., *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*, p. 56

“And they didn't! ... They really didn't see it. They really didn't recognize just how much their ordinary expressions of love would do for me.”

She concludes, “On the one hand, I thought it was wonderful that they wouldn't make a big deal out of something that seemed so simple for them, just showing up. But on the other hand, I wanted to shake them and say, 'Do you know how beautiful you are?’” As if they were angels who had forgotten.”⁶

Being of use: not alone, but to one another; at best, not in isolation, but with one another. Not looking down at a device, but looking up at each other, looking up, author Annie Dillard says, as “Together, we notice not only each mountain shadow and each stone on the beach, but we notice each other's beautiful faces and complex natures, so that Creation need not play to an empty house.” Looking up, looking at ... or, standing side by side, looking out at the world with open minds, open hearts, open hands.

“... And shall the earth // seem all of paradise that we shall know?” Beloved spiritual companions, in the end, Wallace Stevens' question hangs not in accusation, but in blessing. We are called – every one of us – to say *yes*, to give ourselves to making manifest the work of the divine hand “on earth as it is in heaven,” as if we were angels who had forgotten.

Rebecca, I'm going to close with a poem: Thomas Centolella's *In the evening, we shall be examined on love*,⁷ which is a quotation from St. John of the Cross. Your formal education is complete. And as we ordain you today, always remember, dear one, that the work to which you have been called is, above all, the creation of the beloved community of memory and hope. From today, forward, the exam is about love.

And it won't be multiple choice,
 though some of us would prefer it that way.
 Neither will it be essay, which tempts us to run on
 when we should be sticking to the point, if not together.
 In the evening there shall be implications
 our fear will change to complications. No cheating,
 we'll be told, and we'll try to figure the cost of being true
 to ourselves. In the evening when the sky has turned
 that certain blue, blue of exam books, blue of no more

6 Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, *How Can I Help?* p. 237

7 Thomas Centolella, *Lights & Mysteries*, p. 114

daily evasions, we shall climb the hill as the light empties
and park our tired bodies on a bench above the city
and try to fill in the blanks. And we won't be tested
like defendants on trial, cross-examined
till one of us breaks down, guilty as charged. No,
in the evening, after the day has refused to testify,
we shall be examined on love like students
who don't recall signing up for the course
and now must take their orals, forced to speak for once
from the heart and not off the top of their heads.
And when the evening is over and it's late,
the student body asleep, even the great teachers
retired for the night, we shall stay up
and run back over the questions, each in our own way:
what's true, what's false, what unknown quantity
will balance the equation, what it would mean years from now
to look back and know
we did not fail.