

**New St. James Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, August 25, 2019**  
**Rev. Dr. David Thompson**

**The power of one!**  
**Healing the soul of the world**

Often in real life there are situations where everything goes wrong and you just have to laugh. The hard part comes when you just can't laugh without upsetting your host. So, you have to suppress it.

There is a true story of Prince Charles, intent on making a difference as a power of one, in Sri Lanka.

No sooner had the plane touched down on the tarmac of Colombo airport- than the dramas and comedy began. The Sri Lanka artillery unit, performing the 21-gun salute, inadvertently managed to set fire to the grass beside the runway with red hot shell casings. As fire engines raced past the royal dias, the Prince was invited to inspect the guard of honour; whereupon a stray dog sensing a friend, appeared from nowhere and joined him.

At this precise moment the military band struck up the Liberty Bell, better known as the theme, tune to Monty Python. As the Prince remarked later, he was biting his tongue so hard to retain his composure, that he nearly drew blood!

“May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer.”

Gerard Manley Hopkins, a clergyman poet wrote:  
**“The world is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;”**

Have you ever been out in Nature and felt a reverence there? Perhaps when you were on vacation and you stood inside a redwood that is 1500 years old, as I did in California ,and felt its power pulsing around you; or when you looked out at the ocean to consider its size and teeming life, or perhaps when you watched a butterfly flitting about through flower stems in your own back yard?

We often say that humans have souls- that part of us, which is our essence, which having lived and been shaped here by earthly reality, moves into another dimension and at the end of life goes to God its Creator, hopefully in joy. But does the natural world have a soul as well?

Plato thought so. He said, “The cosmos is a single Living Creature which contains all living creatures within it.”

Cicero agreed: “Everything is alive. Everything is interconnected.”

The Jewish Scriptures say that “The Earth is the Lord’s and the **fullness** thereof and all they that dwell therein.”

The Christian Scriptures say that “all things are alive with the Life of Christ and that in him all things consist.”

The Christian Gnostics carried this tradition forward and the alchemists as well. But when the Western church encountered pantheism where people saw nature as animate with Gods spirit, they became fearful and the church fathers began to teach that the world was neither divine nor sacred. A transcendent Divinity was the source of all creation, they said, and humanity lived in exile from heaven in a state of sin. This doctrine created a split between matter and spirit, causing the world to be seen as **separate** from its Creator.

Pelagius a 4th century monk did not buy this split between matter and spirit. Writing to an elderly friend he said:

***"Look at the animals roaming the forest: God's Spirit dwells within them.  
Look at the birds flying across the sky: God's Spirit dwells within them.  
Look at the tiny insects crawling in the grass: God's Spirit dwells within them.  
Look at the fish in the river and the sea: God's Spirit dwells within them.  
There is no creature on earth in whom God is absent...  
The presence of God's Spirit in all living things is what makes them beautiful.  
And if we look with God's eyes,  
Nothing on earth is ugly".***

Pelagius was condemned as a heretic.

The Renaissance was a time when once again the concept of **animus mundi**, or the world soul, was revived as Greek Civilization was rediscovered.

Stephan Hoeller, a Sufi, writes: “In the Renaissance, the World Soul was understood as a spiritual essence within creation, guiding the unfolding of life and the cosmos.

The World Soul was also the creative principle that the Renaissance artists sought to channel in their work. Their art was based upon the same sacred proportions they saw in nature, and they understood the imagination as a magical power that can “lure and channel the energies of the *anima mundi*.”

The Western Church asserted itself and reestablished the split between matter and spirit. Science, after Descartes, jumped on this convenient wagon and nature became a machine. We still perpetuate this today, to our peril, as the world becomes our mechanical plaything that somehow can sustain unlimited population growth, can sustain the ruthless exploitation of resources and withstand our abuse. The result among other things is global warming and climate change and the loss of the lungs of the earth in Amazonia with the loss of the tropical rain forest.

If we hold wrong ideas about the earth, we pay with the consequences.

With the coming of environmental degradation, James Lovelock, an English chemist, proposed in the 1970's a new, but actually very old theory, which he called after the Greek Goddess Gaia. The Gaia hypothesis, proposes that all organisms and their inorganic surroundings are closely integrated to form a single and self-regulating force, maintaining the conditions for Life on the planet.

“The Gaia hypothesis focuses on how the biosphere and life forms contribute to the stability of global temperature, ocean salinity and oxygen in the atmosphere and keep them in a stable sustainable relationship. Initially received with hostility by the scientific community, it is now studied in the discipline of Earth System Science.” (Wikipedia)

The Celts, the Native Americans and the Kogis of Colombia, among many aboriginal tribes, teach that what befalls our souls, inevitably befalls the world soul.

Do you find yourself discouraged today about the world? Are you upset as you hear about groups like the Laska fishermen, asking their political masters for action to control carbon emissions? Why? Because the acidic oceans are affecting fish stocks!

The fishermen know that the acidity is coming from fossil fuels. But the politicians want it all – good fisheries and jobs coming from fossil fuels, as the oil companies lobby for more drilling for fossil fuels beneath the ocean floor.

Perhaps, like the fishermen, you feel helpless as you watch climate change move from theory to dominance of our weather reports with wildfires, with rising temperatures, hurricanes and tornadoes increasing in intensity? And you say to yourself what can one person do about the problems of the world anyway?

As these things happen, do you find yourself astonished by the overwhelming sense of helplessness that can wash over you?

At first, we may decide to arm ourselves against despair as these waves wash daily over us through the media. We feel so small; that there is no hope. We move our lives into a mode of quiet desperation in order just to survive and cope.

But this kind of despair is toxic stuff. It is contagious too!

So, instead of going into despair we need both to heal the soul of the world **and let the soul of the world heal us!**

We need to stand below the ancient tree giants, gaze out into the ocean and watch a butterfly flit about the flowers. And there we need to let The Divinity, “the deep-down sweetness of things”, heal us.

We must do all in our power to resist the feelings of hopelessness, for they do not serve us. We must call for strength from the Creator God, the God who has been active with all peoples from the dawn of time, the God who is found in “all things bright and beautiful, in all creatures great and small.”

When St Patrick felt beleaguered in Ireland, he drew on an ancient piece of possibly Druidic poetry to renew his flagging spirit- poetry which celebrates the *Anima Mundi*.

Can you see him beginning his day by claiming these words to drive his discouragement away? I see him standing in his window with his arms outstretched to the sun saying:

***I arise today through the strength of heaven, the light of Sun, the radiance of moon, the splendor of fire, the speed of lightening, the swiftness of wind, the depth of the sea, the stability of earth and the firmness of rock!***

One mistake we often make is to think that we have to take on the whole world at once and that somehow because we know about some suffering in the world, it is our problem to solve and thus we feel overwhelmed.

But that is not to think in a way that will heal the world's soul. Better it is to take on one problem at a time. We **can** effect change with one cause, one challenge and one thing that has fallen out of harmony with the world even if it is just a little thing. For we can all be healers wherever we touch! And there are many of us!

Whenever we feel discouraged let's remember Margaret Meade's words:

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

She says, "Never depend upon institutions or government to solve any problem". "All social movements are founded by, guided by, motivated and seen through by the passion of individuals."

There are levels of action we can take when we are about healing the soul of the world, from the apparently small to the apparently more significant.

You have no doubt heard of 'the butterfly effect'.

***"The phrase refers to the idea that a butterfly's wings might create tiny changes in the atmosphere that may ultimately alter the path of a tornado or delay, accelerate or even prevent the occurrence of a tornado in another location. Note that the butterfly does not cause the tornado. The flap of the wings is a part of the initial conditions; one set of conditions leads to a tornado while the other set of conditions doesn't. The flapping wing represents a small change in the initial condition of the system, which causes a chain of events leading to large-scale alterations of events. Had the butterfly not flapped its wings, the trajectory of the system might have been vastly different-it's possible that the set of conditions without the butterfly flapping its wings is the set that leads to a tornado."*** (Wikipedia article)

Once I saw a butterfly flapping its wings in a kind of suspended animation. As I approached, I saw that it was caught in a spider web and quite obviously was not happy.

I broke the web, but the butterfly continued to struggle in my hand not being able to fly. On closer examination I saw that the web was wrapped around its wings and so I carefully started to remove the web. I was successful and the butterfly went on her way.

What did she think happened to her I wonder, and did I stop a tornado from coming? We shall never know. But I was elated! I had made a difference in one tiny little life.

Dan West was in Spain in the civil war 1937-38. People were starving around him and his job was to ration out milk to starving children. He always ran out of milk and he felt terrible, for without that milk those children would starve to death. By Red Cross rules, he was supposed to drink a

quart of milk a day to sustain himself, but he felt terrible doing so, because the same milk was denied to dying children.

So, Dan, seated alone, beneath an almond tree in Spain, found the soul of the world beginning to speak to him. After observing the frustration of so many desperate people Dan **became aware of the bubbling stream and the soft grass beneath his hands.**

He thought to himself “These people had been farmers. If they had cows they would once again be able to supply milk for their desperate children. Could cows possibly be sent here from the State of Ohio? Could he heal this situation?

When he got back to Ohio, he was greeted by his children, a one year old and a three-year-old, two rosy cheeked farm children. As he watched them drink their milk, in Dan’s eyes were the images of the children of Spain, skinny children, with haunting sad eyes.

He decided that he would love to share the bounty of America with **those sad eyes and see them glow with gratitude**, but what could one man do?

That one man decided he could **talk** about it to anyone who would listen. He was eager, dynamic, passionate. Even the children stopped their playing to listen when he would speak at public gatherings. He had a vision: green pastures, healthy cows, giving wholesome milk to healthy children.

Would people help at his church, in his own family? Would his neighbors help?

His wife said: “This is an impossible dream!” But she helped Dan anyway, because she loved him.

One day a farmer said he would donate a cow. Another said he would feed the cow until it was time to be shipped.

Soon there were questions at every meeting. What would they do with the milk as it was being shipped across the ocean- throw it overboard? Who would milk the cows? Who would look after them on board ship?

Some bright spark said: “If we ship over **pregnant heifers** there will be no milk problem and they will have a calf and that calf can be given away too!”

Dan talked to city folks and they got onboard with the idea. They would help finance it.

Cowboys volunteered to go with the heifers on board and look after them until they got to their destinations. “I know about cows. I’ll go” said one boy shouting it out eagerly.

It took 6 years for the dream to happen, until in 1944 heifers ‘Faith’ ‘Hope’ and ‘Charity’, along with 13 of their girlfriends and one calf were sent to Puerto Rico. After the Second World War was over, shipments went to Spain.

Heifer International is big today. Millions of families have been helped by the power of one man’s dream.

The greatest problem we face as a world today is global warming. We have just had the hottest summer on record. These past weeks have been a killer from a heat point of view and people all over the world are beginning to understand that we must do something. We are losing the Amazon Rain forest, the lungs of the earth, to fires deliberately set and encouraged by Brazil’s President. And the world is now alarmed at the ignorance and the appalling stewardship of the world’s most diverse eco system and the potential loss of the 20% of the world oxygen that the Amazon rainforest produces.

What do we do?

In the town of Kodiak Alaska, the fishermen can't wait any longer for action from Washington to lower carbon footprint and so they have taken things in hand themselves and built wind generators on the tops of the hills that now supply 95% of the power for Kodiak, and its **clean** energy.

One island off the coast of Portugal, Porto Santo now has electric cars with reversible batteries that take and send back into the power grid when needed, especially at night. Several cities around the world have set goals to be zero emissions by 2050. Shell oil has committed to be carbon free by 2050.

A Canadian Presbyterian leader said this about climate change: "Panic, fear, economics, those are not really ways to motivate the human spirit to change," Rev. Dr. Rick Fee, general secretary of the Life and Mission Agency said following the faith leaders' summit and the UN climate summit, both of which he attended. "I think it's only through faith that people will recognize their responsibility to change their lifestyle. And we **do** have to change our lifestyle."

Today as people of faith who want to make a difference we do not need to be discouraged. We need to put our faith in God and the goodness and resilience of nature. We need to put our faith in the Holy Spirit, the same Holy Spirit who brooded over the waters in the book of Genesis who brought forth life out of chaos.

Hopkins, a clergyman, wrote about the degradation he saw in the industrial revolution and this is what he said in response:

***"all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.***

***And[yet] for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —***

***Because the Holy [ Spirit] Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.***

Let us heed Hopkins vision and partner with the Holy Spirit to renew the earth, never forgetting the power of one person, under God, to make a difference wherever they touch the world. That one person could be you...and me...for we are all in this together...and there is no planet B!  
Amen.