

**The Rainbow Connection**  
**The United Church of Gainesville**  
**May 3, 2009**  
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**Genesis 9; Matthew 5:3–12; “Unharvested” Robert Frost**

In researching this sermon, I came upon a critique of churches that tend toward what the writer called a “Rainbow and butterfly theology of the West Coast (read San Francisco)”. This writer does not think of a theology of “rainbows and butterflies” in a kind way. And since Sandy and I have spent a lot of our continuing education at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, the supposed epicenter of rainbow/butterfly theology... since we often quote theologians from that coast... since our wall banners were until last week, batik butterflies... since our new sacred art for the sanctuary is all about rainbows... since our theme is “Over the Rainbow” and since today’s sermon is after all “The Rainbow Connection” – well, in southern terms that attack on rainbows and butterflies – “them’s fightin’ words.” The charge against the rainbow and butterfly thing is that it is a New Age theology of puffed air, a lightweight view of the struggles of life. In this sermon I aim to set things straight.

First of all, the challenge is not to find the meaning of rainbows in the faith traditions of the world. The challenge is to find any faith tradition or mythology that does not include rainbows. Rainbows have claimed the imagination of virtually every people in the world. Norse theology sees the rainbow as a bridge between heaven and earth. Greek mythology sees the rainbow as the path of the goddess Iris who steals the rainbow’s colors from Zeus. Slavic tradition believes that if you pass under a rainbow, you will change gender. Iranian Muslim tradition has it that the most prominent color of the rainbow will foretell whether the future holds war, healing, good crops or pestilence. Often the rainbow is likened to the bow of the divine archer.

In our Judeo Christian tradition the only mention of the rainbow comes at the end of the story of the flood, which was read this morning.

It is good to remember that in our archetypal flood story, Noah did not experience God's rainbow presence by letting a thousand flowers bloom. He never would have accepted a theology of "Don't worry, be happy." Instead he experienced a catastrophic flood that Bible scholars believe to have impacted the entire middle-eastern world. Every religious faith of the region incorporated that flood into their faith stories to try to make sense out of it.

Noah lost many friends, and he almost lost his family in a terrible storm in which he did his best to save whatever and whoever he could. I'm reminded of walking down the streets of ruined homes and shattered lives in Biloxi, Mississippi in October of 2005, about six weeks after Hurricane Katrina hit. Wherever we stopped and asked the families working in their yards to share their stories, they told Noah-like tales of huddling in their attics as the first wave swept through their homes, and cringing there as the second wave came crashing back hurtling their furniture and belongings against the walls below them. Some people cut holes in their attic roofs to escape rising waters. Others had fled to the safety of inland families just hours before the storm hit. They were still dazed. Each of them had a story of faith and renewal in their tales, and many of them told us who had come to help that we in essence were their rainbows of promise that life would go on.

So I can imagine Noah, also stunned, wondering if there was life remaining anywhere in the known world. I can imagine Noah climbing out of his makeshift boat and wondering if there was any reason to go on. The sign he reported seeing was of a rainbow, and in that rainbow he sensed a promise that morning and night, summer and winter, seedtime and harvest would never end. God would never destroy our world.

If that's the rainbow theology that its critics deride, I'll take it.

It is interesting to me that of all the mythology of rainbows around the world, the one we know the best is the Irish legend of the pot of gold guarded by a leprechaun who will protect it from any mortal's discovery of it. Ireland and Scotland are lands of deep sorrow and great joy, with lots of rain followed by great celebrations when the sun reappears. These isles are also the keepers of Celtic theology, whose common prayer is, "Deep peace of the running waves to you, deep place of flowing air to

you, deep peace of the smiling stars to you, deep peace of the quiet earth to you, deep peace of the quiet shepherd to you, deep peace of the Child of Peace to you.”

This is a faith that knows how to see God in nature yet not contained by nature, to find in our created world, dream symbols of our lives.

I commend rainbows as reminders to seek that which we cannot possess, that which is above what we can understand, and that which is beyond what is only filled with pleasure. I love the quote by Dolly Parton, “The way I see it, if you want the rainbow, you gotta put up with the rain.”

The song, the “Rainbow Connection” that Gabby sang so beautifully, wonders “Why there are so many songs about rainbows and what’s on the other side. Rainbows are visions and only illusions and rainbows have nothing to hide. So we’ve been told and some choose to believe it. I know they’re wrong wait and see. Someday we’ll find it the rainbow connection, the lovers, the dreamers and me.

This supposedly simple children’s song, originally sung a frog by the name of Kermit no less, reminds us that it’s always worth having a dream, a star, a rainbow to believe in, knowing that it can never be fully attained, but that it keeps our dreams alive.

The song, “The Rainbow Connection” resonates with God’s promise to Noah, that although life will at times be hard, and people will behave poorly again, God’s promise to sustain us never leaves us.

I read an article, “The Brain Game” in The New Yorker last week by Margaret Talbot on the expanding use of what are called “neuroenhancing” drugs especially among students in elite colleges like Harvard, and among professionals in high pressure businesses. In a nutshell, they have discovered that drugs like Adderall and Ritalin, originally developed to help children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, also help high functioning overcommitted people to become higher-functioning and more overcommitted. These drugs don’t necessarily make you smarter or give you answers you didn’t already have, but they give you energy to basically think you have it all. If you’re a student, you can have the grades, extra curricular activities, and late night parties. If you’re working you can make a speech in, say, France in

the morning, fly back across the ocean to make a sharp presentation three time zones away that evening and close the deal, meanwhile edging out another employee working on a normal cycle of wakefulness and sleep.

Talbot sees these drugs becoming as common and accepted as cosmetic surgery, or perhaps even eyeglasses. To me it seems a little like outsmarting the leprechaun and stealing the gold from the rainbow. It kills the dream by achieving it.

Which brings me to one more image. I believe that our faith calls us to believe in dreams we cannot achieve, and live for them nevertheless. I believe there is grace in striving and seeking. I believe that the rainbow is a good symbol of striving after impossible dreams.

One way to explain this came to me quite unexpectedly at the retreat last weekend. I went back to our cabin after the pick-up softball game (which by the way was a wonderful experience of chasing rainbows in and of itself. But that's another story). While I was waiting to meet Sandy to go to the afternoon workshop for couples, I wound up talking with Charlie Williams who had been engaging in some peaceful reading and reflection. Charlie had heard somewhere that memorizing poetry was a good thing to do for the mind and soul. He had duly memorized a poem by Robert Frost called "Unharvested". He recited it for me, and I asked him to do it again for us today.

*A scent of ripeness from over a wall,  
And come to leave the routine road  
And look for what had made me stall,  
There sure enough was an apple tree  
That had eased itself of its summer load,  
And of all but its trivial foliage free,  
Now breathed as light as a lady's fan.  
For there had been an apple fall  
As complete as the apple had given man.  
The ground was one circle of solid red.*

*May something go always unharvested!  
May much stay out of our stated plan,*

*Apples or something forgotten and left,  
So smelling their sweetness would be no theft.*

*(“Unharvested” by Robert Frost, cited in Good Poems for Hard Times, Garrison, Keillor, ed. Viking Press, 2005, p. 26)*

To summarize, the poet catches a rich scent, one familiar and comforting, stops and looks over a wall for the source. There he sees what's called an apple fall, a tree at the end of its growing season that has simply dropped all its apples, unpicked. In Florida I've had this experience walking down a country road in Melrose and encountering a ring of oranges all having fallen from their tree and beginning to ferment. The poet says there should always be times and places in life where cycles of life go unharvested, left for a traveler such as he to stop and smell without having stolen a thing. Places left unharvested, incomplete make room for the grace of a fragrance recollected, an open gap in a busy life. God is often in the gaps, not the completion.

So I leave you with three thoughts today. First is that rainbows need not be silly symbols. Grounded in Noah's experience of life as he knew it being washed away around him, the rainbow was a good and solid sign of God's promise, embedded in, but not limited to the cycles of nature. Such a symbol comes out of hardship and rain, beckoning our hopes and our lives to the future.

Second, there is the poignant plea of the song, “the Rainbow Connection” calling anyone who will listen to wish upon rainbows and morning stars. That is a good way to live, to break away from all that is explained objectively.

Third, I believe that, as the poet Robert Browning once said, “One's reach should exceed our grasp, or what's a heaven for?” It is good to have dreams beyond our accomplishment. We shouldn't feel we have to take brain enhancing drugs or work ourselves to exhaustion to have it all. As Robert Frost says, it is good to leave something in life unharvested for the next searching soul to discover as grace.

I think Jesus was giving us a glimpse of this kind of searching faith when he shared the beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount. To believe we can experience the happiest of blessings while we are poor and meek,

mourners and peacemakers... To let us know just that when the world turns against us for standing up for what is right... that in this experience is the realm of heaven... this is the rainbow connection of faith, and it is not trivial at all.

Prayer –

Pause and think of rainbows, literal rainbows of beautiful colors you have seen in your life. Picture them. Remember where you saw them. And give thanks for those moments.

Pray for rainbow hopes that you have dared to dream, some that came true, others that remained dreams, and thank God for both.

Pray for rainbow hopes for the future, dreams unfolding, of people together, people of all colors, of all sexual orientation, of all ages, of all nations finding promise together. Pray for the elusive dreams of peace, especially that our nation may soon find a time when we are not sending our youth to fight.

And take a minute of silence to pray for your own dearest vision, something you long for with all your heart... Pause. See your prayer as a rainbow promise, and trust that your vision is good.