

19th March 2023 – PLYMOUTH

Boundaries and barriers – led by Rev Kate Whyman

1. **INTRO MUSIC** 'To spring', Grieg

<https://youtu.be/SFhy0yCaTIA>

2. **WELCOME/CHALICE LIGHT**

Welcome and good morning to you all, all here in church, and all of you joining online from wherever you may be.

Words by Sarah C Stewart

Bring who you are as you enter this space this morning.

Bring your best self and your struggling self;

bring your mistakes and your triumphs;

bring your shortcomings and your recommitment to good.

Bring yourself here and open your heart to beauty, to truth,

to the door that is open to the presence of God.

Today is Mothering Sunday, and I'd like to wish all of you who are mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers a joyful day. And if this is a difficult day for you, for whatever reason, then I wish you peace in your heart.

Let's begin our service, as is our custom, by lighting our chalice candle as a symbol of our free religious faith. (Do please light one with me if you are able to do so.)

LIGHT CHALICE

We light this flame this morning to begin our time of worship, to light our way, to warm our hearts, to be a sign of hope for us all.

I'm continuing our theme of vulnerability this morning, but as it is the spring equinox tomorrow, which is a time of balance, and the mid point between the winter and

summer solstices, we'll consider how we too might find balance between having healthy boundaries that keep us safe and unhelpful barriers that limit our flourishing.

3. **PRAYERS** Thomas Merton's prayer is one of vulnerability, of not-knowing, of humility. And because of that to me it speaks of great faith.

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

And now our first hymn speaks of spring...

4. **FIRST HYMN 267 (G)** We sing the roses waiting

We sing of golden mornings,
we sing of sparkling seas,
of fenlands, valleys, mountains,
and stately forest trees.

We sing of flashing sunshine
and life-bestowing rain,
of birds among the branches,
and springtime come again.

We sing the heart courageous,
the youthful, eager mind;
we sing of hopes undaunted,
of friendly ways and kind.

We sing the roses waiting
beneath the deep-piled snow;
we sing, when night is darkest,
The day's returning glow.

Music Alexander Ewing, words from Ralph Waldo Emerson

5. **STORY** 'The castle door', from *Doorways to the Soul*, edited by Elisa Davy Pearmain. Based on a traditional Sufi story.

Once long ago in a distant land, a prince was riding through a deep forest far from his home with his company of soldiers, looking for new lands to conquer. Quite suddenly he came upon a clearing in the trees. There before him stretched a meadow leading to a glorious hill. The meadow and hill were covered with blossoming trees, bushes, and wildflowers. At the top of the hill was a castle that seemed made of pure gold. It sparkled so in the sunlight that the prince was nearly blinded.

Fascinated, the prince signaled to his regiment, and together they rode closer and closer, and up the hill toward the castle. The birds sang sweetly, the perfume of flowers was lovely. As they drew near the castle, he saw that a window opened for a moment in the wall and a face appeared, a face that shone more brilliantly than the sun and yet more gently than any flower. Then it was gone.

Instantly he fell in love.

He knocked upon the castle door.

'Who is there?' came a voice softer than the bluest sky.

'It is I, Prince Rindleheart. I am known throughout the land for my bravery. My armies are the strongest. My castle is but two days' ride from here. May I please come and be with you?'

'There is only room for one of us here,' came the reply.

The prince rode away in dejection. He traveled around through seven kingdoms, fighting dragons, escaping from dungeons, taking land. Everywhere he went he was a hero. And yet the praise meant nothing, for everywhere he went he thought only of

the shining light of his beloved and of her words, 'There is only room for one of us here.'

Finally, in his desperations, he sought the wisdom of a wise woman.

'Perhaps your armies intimidate her,' she suggested.

'Of course', he thought.

He returned to the castle alone and knocked upon the door.

'Who is there?' came the sweet voice.

'It is I, the prince, alone,' he humbly replied.

'There is only room for one of us here,' said the sweet voice.

He went away again, dejected and confused. He roamed the wilderness for some years until he met a famous wizard.

'Perhaps she cannot know you with all of your armour and weaponry,' he suggested.

'Of course,' said the prince.

So he returned and laid down his armour, his shield, and his sword. He walked humbly to the castle door and knocked.

'Who is there?' asked the voice.

'It is I, your humble servant. No soldier, just a man.'

'There is only room for one of us here,' came the reply.

For seven more years the prince wandered alone in the wilderness, forsaking his kingdom, thinking only of his beloved. He sought wisdom only from the stars in the sky and the wildness inside him.

Finally one day the prince returned to the castle on the hill. He had no armies, no armour, no horse. He walked up the hill, past the bushes now heavily laden with the fruit of autumn, and knocked upon the door.

'Who is there?' came the sweet voice.

The prince took a breath, and said, 'It is thou'.

And the door was opened to him.

6. **READING** *The Place Where We Are Right*, Yehuda Amichai. Translated from the Hebrew by Stephen Mitchell.

From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the spring.

The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.

But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plow.

And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.

7. **SECOND HYMN** 11 (P) Blessed spirit of my life

Blessed Spirit of my life,
give me strength through stress and strife;
help me live with dignity;
let me know serenity.
Fill me with a vision,
clear my mind of fear and confusion.
When my thoughts flow restlessly,
let peace find a home in me.

Spirit of great mystery,
hear the still, small voice in me.
Help me live my wordless creed
as I comfort those in need.

Fill me with compassion;
be the source of my intuition.
Then when life is done for me,
let love be my legacy.

Music and words © Shelley Jackson Denham

8. **SILENCE/Meditation in Knowing ourselves, from Heart & Soul**

This is an invitation to go inwards, so that we may know *ourselves* better. It takes the form of a guided meditation, which we'll conduct in the silence of our own hearts.

Begin by taking a few moments to look back over the past 24 hours. Recall the things what you can: PAUSE

Consider the different moods and feelings you've experienced over the last day or so: Perhaps you have felt excited, or anxious, happy or sad, for example. PAUSE

Bring to mind anything particularly good that has happened, anything you feel pleased or happy about. PAUSE

Now - gently - bring to mind anything that has made you unhappy: or any unintentional hurts that you may have caused anyone else. PAUSE

As you look back, recall when had a sense of being most connected and alive?
PAUSE

And when have felt most disconnected and alone? PAUSE

Consider what is being asked of you right now – perhaps by god, or the universe or your own soul. PAUSE

As this time of knowing prayer comes to a close you might like to speak inwardly, silently, to that which you hold sacred, perhaps asking for guidance, compassion, forgiveness or courage for ourselves.

We'll take a little silence now and then listen to a song.

9. INTERLUDE: Interlude: Both Sides Now, Joni Mitchell

<https://youtu.be/aCnf46boC3I>

10. ADDRESS

Both sides now is song is full of the contradictions and confusions and illusions of being alive. The lyrics are poignant...

*So many things I would have done
But clouds got in my way*

I wonder what were the clouds that got in the way? Circumstances? Concerns about what other people might have thought? We don't know. And then...

*... if you care, don't let them know
Don't give yourself away*

Why might she have sung those words? What's the fear in giving yourself away? What does giving yourself away mean? Is it not letting them see who you really are?

*Tears and fears and feeling proud
To say, "I love you" right out loud*

Did she ever do that? Or is it something she only wished she'd done?

And ultimately...

It's life's illusions that I recall, I really don't know life at all'

I find the song very moving, with its mix of regret and hope and bafflement. Life can be confusing. And how much should we – could we - reveal of ourselves at any particular time. When is the time to be cautious and when to be brave? What's 'too much information'? And what's being aloof or even secretive? How do we let people in without letting them take us over? And how do we establish healthy boundaries that keep us safe without battering down all the hatches and rendering ourselves unknowable?

What has any of this to do with a spiritual life?

To me these are all questions about our identity, about who and what we understand ourselves to be. And they're about the nature of relationship and intimacy. At heart they are questions about how we learn the openness and honesty and authenticity which is really integral to being both fully human and connected, while still keeping ourselves safe. How we learn to have boundaries that protect ourselves and others without erecting barriers between us,

The poet Yehuda Amichai was an Israeli who wrote in contemporary Hebrew about everyday life but also God and philosophy. He died in 2000 but the poem we heard feels like one for our divided times. He describes 'The place where we are right' as a lifeless, dry, barren place. Somewhere no flowers grow. It's an evocative image for me. When I'm with people who are certain they are right – or when I'm convinced I'm right myself! – it feels there's little possibility of movement or growth or understanding. Certainty shuts down inquiry, and closes off relationship. When we 'know we are right' we are putting a barrier up between ourselves and others. Placing ourselves on an imaginary pedestal, becoming defensive and brittle. Whereas, the poet says, 'doubts and loves dig up the world like a mole, a plow.' So when we are a little less sure of ourselves, a little more curious, then some air and space can get in. And now, the poet says, 'a whisper will be heard in the place where the ruined house once stood.' That's a beautiful line, I think. The possibility of connection arises in the unknowing.

The prince in our story was very sure of himself at the start, wasn't he, very confident of his abilities and his powers, his triumphs and his various heroics. But he fell in love (which we recall digs up the world like a mole, a plow). And to meet his beloved he found had to learn to drop some of his outer shells – to peel away the layers of bravado and self-importance if he was to gain entry to the castle where lived the mysterious one with the sweet voice. In the original Sufi story, this is a tale about approaching God. It's about the process – the spiritual journey - of dropping the ego and its many layers of delusion and self-centredness in order to find union with the divine. And in this way it's a story that could be understood by any of the mystic traditions, that to meet the Beloved, the Divine, God, we need to let go of our small selves and surrender into the whole realm of Oneness.

But the story works on a more simply human level too. After all how do you feel in the presence of someone who's full of their own opinions and self-importance? It's hard to connect, isn't it? The pathway to increased mutual understanding seems to be blocked. Whereas someone who is willing to drop their guard and share a little of themselves with you, and countenance another view, and who is willing to listen if you choose to do the same – then that is a different matter. Then hearts and minds can truly begin to meet. We can meet soul to soul and that, surely, is in any case another way of meeting God.

Prince Rindleheart – which is a name I can't say without wanting to giggle – he had to learn to be vulnerable one step at a time, as do most of us. It's a process. And it's often better if we allow our boundaries to soften and our barriers to come down gradually and safely in a process of continuous discernment and wisdom, which in time may lead to a deepening of friendship and love.

Of course sometimes the greatest barriers are actually within. It may simply be too painful to look inside and far easier to pretend even to ourselves that everything is fine. That's a strategy that can work for a while but ultimately won't serve us. Honesty with ourselves is part of the ongoing spiritual work we do that brings us closer to our own truth as well as leans us closer to the god of our understanding. There really is little point in keeping up pretences with oneself or with God – who are we kidding? – and yet plenty of us do exactly that. Again, our spiritual life is a process of engaging with what's really happening and our true selves, but like the prince, doing this gradually and at our own pace.

How do you deepen *your* self knowledge? Perhaps you journal or keep a spiritual diary. Or maybe pray, perhaps like Thomas Merton, admitting to God when you feel lost. Regular meditations like the one we practised earlier can help too. Gradually the barriers may fall. Reality is our saviour but it needs to be approached with care, just as the prince had to learn how to approach the castle, it's not usually advisable to look at the sun directly.

This time of year is one of hope, but also of equilibrium. Gently does it. While the length of the days and nights are equal, may we take care of ourselves and also give

of ourselves in equal measure, gradually becoming a little more real, a little more honest and a little less defended as we go.

Amen.

11. **THIRD HYMN 59 (P)** Ground it's time for your rebirth

Ground, it's time for your rebirth, Alleluiah!
Flower and leaf buds blossom forth, Alleluiah!
Rise from soil, rise from the ground, Alleluiah
Now that spring is all around, Alleluiah!

Friend, take heart and find new cheer, Alleluiah!
Your new birth at least is here, Alleluiah!
Rise above despair, defeat, Alleluiah!
Now with joy your new life greet, Alleluiah!

Earth, for you there is new scope, Alleluiah!
Your new birth at last is here, Alleluiah!
Rise above despair, defeat, Alleluiah!
Now with joy your new life greet, Alleluiah!

Cosmos, broad and deep with space, Alleluiah!
Stars and planets you embrace, Alleluiah!
Raise us to our human part, Alleluiah!
Hold us with your loving heart, Alleluiah!

Words © Andrew M. Hill

12. **CLOSING WORDS** Wendell Berry

It may be that when we no longer know what to do we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go we have come to our real journey.
The mind that is not baffled is not employed.
The impeded stream is the one that sings.

Extinguish chalice

13. **CLOSING VIDEO** 'Here comes the sun', cover by One Time Weekend

<https://youtu.be/2ysWB1S0FQs>