

Christ, the Conversation (John 14:15–21)

Sermon for St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church by Mary Sebold

May 14, 2023, Rogation Sunday, the Sixth Sunday of Easter (Year A)

Let us pray.*

May the Conversation,
the Christ,

far off and here
mute though spoken,

trouble *you*
with tiny
but frightening requests

to come & see,

for a brief moment,
the place *we*
want to get back to.

In the name of Jesus,
Christ incarnate, *Amen*.

Please be seated.

Have you ever watched words fly off a page, linger in the air, and descend, sometimes in a new order? Have you ever lifted a rock to find a whole world bustling about in miniature? Have you ever seen a herd of deer take off to answer a call you cannot hear? Or toadstools suddenly appear in a spot on the forest floor, only to march off and stand in formation elsewhere? Or leaves rise from the ground, swirl in the breeze, and fall, always in a different pattern? Has poetry or Nature ever approached to speak with *you*? What is really going on here, all around us in Creation—of which we and the poets are part?

In a couple of weeks, we will celebrate Pentecost, the “arrival” of the Holy Spirit—our advocate, mediator, paraclete, helper. But this Sunday, let’s pause to notice what has continued with God since before time began—what John calls in the opening of his gospel the Logos, what we know now as the Word, and what Jesus is about to rejoin fully in his ascension. What I’m talking about is Christ, the Eternal Conversation with God and—through the Holy Spirit—the Earth and beyond.

Until the fourth century, scholars used the Latin *sermo* for the Greek, *logos*. *Sermo* means conversation and comes from the Latin verb, *sero*, to join. John intended his Greek-speaking audience to understand logos as conversation, a *process* marked by interconnection, relationship, and reciprocity. Logos was a way for John to talk about Christ, what holds the universes together. But along came empire, and Constantine commissioned the Vulgate, a new Latin translation of the Bible. In it—and for all time, despite Erasmus’s heroic rescue attempts in the sixteenth century—*sermo* became *verbum*, or word, a single, limited noun that suggests no exchange and allows no dissent. *Sermo* moves; *verbum* stands still.

This purposeful change had profound consequences on our understanding of Christ and on our relationship with Creation. We—in the West, at least—made of the Logos, or Christ, a *thing* to attain, to obey, to use, to ignore. Over time, we became disconnected; we ceased conversing with Nature and each other. We paved over the wood wide web of living soil, fungi, and trees. We couldn’t hear anymore, let alone listen. The noise of the world wide web and social media,

paradoxically, silenced civil discourse. Violence and destruction resulted. Humanity has repeatedly tried to kill the Conversation, cut it off entirely. Long ago, we broke Christ's legs on a cross, the sawed-up branches of a tree. How dare, we?

Yet Jesus, the Christ, rose from the dead. For a time, he appeared to his disciples in different guises. This, after a short earthly ministry of constant movement, of arriving and leaving, of teaching and healing. Jesus wasn't static like a noun, disconnected like a single word from conversation. He traveled unburdened by nouns. When not in town or temple, he was in the wilderness, God's wild places, where he talked with God (Satan and some angels, too!) and where he visited with his other, non-human flocks.

Today, in our reading, Jesus speaks midway between his human and divine natures. After all, he is about to leave his disciples to die. He's ready to merge into Christ, into Everlasting Conversation. And he promises to remain in relationship with his followers through a facilitator, the Holy Spirit. "In a little while," Jesus says, "the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live." And to see, to hear, to listen, to live, we must *do* love. Then, we will open to reciprocal conversation with all of Creation. Then, we will encounter Christ everywhere, through life's quiet verbs, its precious action: We will sense the dry leaves, shimmer. The snail's heart, beat. The deer, come walking down the hill. John's poetry, leave the page to settle in our hearts with new meaning.

Rogationtide ends on Thursday, Ascension Day. We are nearing the end of the Easter Season and Jesus's time among us. Let's go back to the beginning of John's story. Let's hear what the earliest Christians and Erasmus did:

"In the beginning, was the Conversation, and the Conversation was with God, and the Conversation was God. This was with God in the beginning. All things came into being through this, and apart from this nothing came into being that has come into being ...
And the Conversation became flesh and dwelt among us."

"And the Conversation became flesh and dwelt among us." Jesus was that flesh. Even now, he and our "other" advocate, the Holy Spirit, invite us to dwell in Christ with created beings from kingdoms of all sorts.

This week, go into the wild as Jesus did—if only in your mind's eye. Be still. Meet a deer's gaze. Listen. Let a toadstool introduce you to a tree. Lose yourself in relationship with the unfamiliar. Marvel. On your return, go in person to your neighbor's house. Converse. Let us all join Christ, God's wonder-filled Exchange. In the name of Conversation, Amen.

**The prayer was composed of lines from the following poems read on the patio before the service on Rogation Sunday. (Scroll to the end for more information on Rogationtide.):*

Sometimes

by David Whyte (1955–)

Sometimes
if you move carefully
through the forest,

breathing
like the ones
in the old stories,

who could cross
a shimmering bed of dry leaves
without a sound,

you come to a place
whose only task

is to trouble you
with tiny
but frightening requests,

conceived out of nowhere
but in this place
beginning to lead everywhere.

Requests to stop what
you are doing right now,
and

to stop what you
are becoming
while you do it,

questions
that can make
or unmake
a life,

questions
that have patiently

waited for you,

questions
that have no right
to go away.

from Of the Snail & its Loveliness

by Victoria Adukwei Bulley (1991—)

Once, I saw a snail so small
so young its shell was still
transparent.

I stopped to look—I had the time
to see a thing unseen before—
a tiny flute.

a ghost of white that swayed
within the sleeping shell,
marking time so faithfully.

Little snail,
you'll never know what happened
outside as you dreamed.

I watched your small heart's
beating
 & called my love
to come & see.

The Place I Want to Get Back To

by Mary Oliver (1935–2019)

is where
 in the pinewoods
 in the moments between
 the darkness

and first light
 two deer
 came walking down the hill
 and when they saw me

they said to each other, okay,
 this one is okay,
 let's see who she is
 and why she is sitting

on the ground, like that,
 so quiet, as if
 asleep, or in a dream,
 but, anyway, harmless;

and so they came
 on their slender legs
 and gazed upon me
 not unlike the way

I go out to the dunes and look
 and look and look
 into the faces of the flowers;
 and then one of them leaned forward

and nuzzled my hand, and what can my life
 bring to me that could exceed
 that brief moment?
 For twenty years

I have gone every day to the same woods,
 not waiting, exactly, just lingering.
 Such gifts, bestowed,
 can't be repeated.

If you want to talk about this
 come to visit. I live in the house
 near the corner, which I have named
 Gratitude.

To the Holy Spirit

by Wendell Berry (1934–)

O Thou, far off and here, whole and broken,
Who in necessity and in bounty wait,
Whose truth is light and dark, mute though spoken,
By Thy wide grace show me Thy narrow gate.

Rogation Sunday

Rogationtide starts after Easter and ends the day before Ascension Day. “Rogation” comes from the Latin *rogare*, to ask. In 470 AD, Bishop Mamertus led a prayerful procession around Vienne, France, to ask God for protection from invading Goths. It was the first Rogation Day.

In England, the so-called major and minor Rogation days became associated with the planting season. The vicar “beat the bounds” of the parish, marking the boundaries with the cross and long sticks. Along the way, he recited psalms and parts of the litany. In the United States, Rogationtide continued in rural areas. It is experiencing a comeback, particularly among Christians concerned about Creation.

For the second year, we celebrated Rogation after Earth and National Poetry months (both in April) by reading four poems about the encounters and conversations we might have in the woods alongside the church.