***In the Eye of the Storm***

***Reclaiming Spirituality as Engagement***

***On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”***

-Mark 4.35-41

***Can we be still, and still be, in the storms of life that surround us?***

Not frantic, or frenzied, or fried, but faithful and trusting, rooted and grounded in love.

You need to be out of your mind to enter the domain of God. We need to get out our heads and put everything down. It begins in silence and stillness. In a culture that suffers from a pervasive shortness of breath, prayer can be breathtaking.

Breathe…

Breathe in us.

Breathe in us O breath of God

Breathe life in us anew

That we might love

the WAY you love

and do as you would do

Breathe…

Breathe in us.

Breathe in us O breath of God

Breathe life in us anew

That we might love

the ONES you love

and do as you would do

Breathe…

Breathe in us.

Breathe in us O breath of God

Breathe life in us anew

That we might love

the WORLD you love

and do as you would do

Breathe… in us Breathe!

Leaves quiver, branches shake, trunks sway, but roots stay firm. The strength of every tree comes from the depths of its roots. To be strong and silent like a tree that makes the spirit-wind sing we must root ourselves in the quiet. Let us open our hearts to the sound of silence.

SILENCE

***How do we examine the signs of these times and tap the spiritual roots of prophetic witness?***

We can examine these signs through many lenses: theology, philosophy, human and natural sciences, and various combinations of these. Each would yield a bounty of issues and insights. As the title suggests, when unearthing the spiritual roots of protest today, with the hope of exposing deeper-wider wisdom, I suggest we focus our lives through the lens of spirituality. Not so much a microscope as a macro-scope, offering a widest horizon, an elongated view and broad strokes. With this perspective, we are not trying to resolve realities but stand under them, expose our lives to the questions they re-present. Christian Spirituality offers us latitude and invites us to pay special attention to the peripheries.

The work of peace and justice, which Dorothy Day called the hard work of the Gospel, addresses systemic realities and root causes. Since roots both anchor and nourish the tree, it is appropriate that we explore these depths. In these times of terror, radical and radicalization are terms that have been hijacked by violent extremism. Yet they speak to going back to our roots, grounding our lives in deeper soil. For us perhaps the heart of all crises, global and personal, is truly spiritual.

Rather than enumerate a litany of issues and -isms that challenge us to faithful living in these times, I offer a broad overview, a set of penetrating questions. Hopefully these will prompt dialogue and surface opportunities worthy of ***life-giving witness*** - another way of describing prophetic protest. In the full sense of the Greek word “crisis”, each question addresses a decisive opportunity or turning point.

1. ***A Crisis of Spirit***

***In times like these, what is the mission of spirituality?***

***Spirituality has a Mission?***

As we revisit “The Spiritual Roots of Protest” in our time, we return (as did those first retreatants) to the Source and source material: to the Gospels, the Scriptures and our faith traditions that outline the mission, thrust and orientation of Spirit and spirituality. Jesus chose Isaiah’s proclamation to describe the Spirit-led mission he has passed on to us.

***“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. Has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”***

-Luke 4:18-19 (from Isaiah 61)

On the original retreat, through the witness of his life and paradox of the silent cloister, Thomas Merton reclaimed an ancient understanding of monasticism, not as flight from the world but rather a deeper penetration of life in this world.

As Anglican minister David Adam describes:

***The true monk of the desert never fled the world, only the game of trivial pursuits that so many insist on playing.***

Mediaeval philosopher and mystic, Meister Eckhart, offers a similarly practical description of the focus and aim of spirituality:

***Spirituality is not to be learned by flight from the world,***

***or by running away from things, or by turning solitary and going apart from the world.***

***Rather, we must learn an inner solitude wherever or with whomsoever we may be.***

***We must learn to penetrate things and find God there.***

Fifty years ago this retreat began with Thomas Merton’s penetrating question,

***“By what right do we protest?”***

If we can accept that Christian spirituality has an apostolic mission, an outgoing trajectory (to empower followers of Jesus to continue the feeding, healing, forgiving work of the Gospel) and a guiding, motivating mission – to lead us toward the Realm of God, then we might look into the signs of these times with a variant of that initial koan:

***“In times like these, HOW do we rightly protest?”***

In the Gospel Jesus offers three household metaphors to describe how to be in this world without being defined by it: salt, light and leaven. These illuminate three dimensions of “prophetic witness-bearing” or protest.

***You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?*** -Matthew 5: 13

As religious affiliation wanes in the Global North, we are witnessing a burgeoning interest in all things “spiritual”. Poke around any airport bookshop and you’ll notice a bloom of resources reflecting a colorful array of traditions. The term “spirituality” now conjures a very different set of connotations than it did half a century ago.

Undoubtedly, the conjoining of diverse spiritual traditions, combined with a broader appreciation for contemplative practices, has enriched our understanding of our role and place in the universe. In this global consumer culture however, spirituality quickly becomes a commodity, made to accommodate the manipulations of the worldwide market, and our endless quest for novelty. All too easily, spirituality is sweetened to meet our personal tastes, personalized to address individual needs and schedules, and diluted to avoid insulting the ideologies that are the prime movers and motivators for so many.

In a reversal of the outward thrust of God’s merciful mission and the spiritual explosion of Pentecost, much of the spiritual fare served up for Christians today dwells almost exclusively on the inward—the individual journey toward personal communion with the Divine. To soften those sharper edges of the Gospel, these privatizing trends would also go so far as to unhitch love of God from the demands of caring for our neighbors. As a result, what is popular in contemporary Christian spirituality appears to miss the Gospel mark entirely. Those of us burdened by privilege and prosperity find ourselves struggling to understand and integrate the Good News into this post–Christian, post-modern context.

Disenfranchised by the failures of our religious institutions, some declare themselves “spiritual rather than religious.” It would seem however, by our consumptive lifestyles, that here too we have become uprooted. The longer we focus in on self-satisfaction, following our individual bliss, addressing a litany of personal needs and anxieties, the further we drift, losing our way into the Reign of God.

Any Christian spirituality that does not directly address suffering (in ourselves, in our neighbors and in nature); that fails to inspire care for vulnerable life; that neglects the challenge of reconciliation and shrinks from promoting peace; that narrows rather than broadens our understanding of kin and community; that avoids the challenge to live humbly with less; is NOT worth its salt.

In our shrinking globe, interfaith and ecumenical dialogue offer unprecedented opportunities to deepen and broaden our interlacing spiritual roots. As we face the challenges of migratory populations and urbanization, our mega cities have become cosmopolitan hotspots. In the face of a tsunami of a global culture of commodity, that is decimating bio-diversity (of species, of language, of ways of being human), we are all longing to belong, looking for community, trying to redefine our tribe. This has fueled competition for resources, stoking the fires of political and cultural wars fought under the guise of religion. Christian spirituality is neither a narcotic nor a personal evacuation plan to avoid or absolve ourselves from responsibility for these conflicts and the complexity of our times.

***How do you envision the role, mission and challenges facing Christian spirituality at this critical time?***

1. ***A Crisis of Community***

***In times like these, where is the room for relationships?***

***‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, where it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to our Maker in heaven.***

-Matthew 5: 14-16

***How would you describe or define your community?***

We can tell a lot about the scope of our love by looking at the people we choose to look after and connect with, where we choose to locate ourselves, and those we include in or exclude from our circle of care.

We are living through an era of greatly increased human mobility. Over a million people are flying through the stratosphere at any given moment. This offers unimagined opportunities for cross-fertilization between nations and cultures. A human family in transit has also unmoored us. Driven by ideologies rooted in competition, philosophies founded on hyper-individualism, economies of exploitation, the loss of a sense of place, of shared living and commitment to stability, has turned us from pilgrims into tourists. Meanwhile, alternative ways of living, ancient traditions, world views, and small-scale societies are being eradicated (pulled up by the roots), turned into trinkets or caricatures for spiritual theme parks.

***Where is the Life we have lost in living?***

***Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?***

***Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?*** -T. S. Eliot

In this dominant, driven to distraction, outcome-oriented culture, the ache for intimacy, deeper connection and identity intensifies. The high-speed information age has produced a plethora of crafty electronic communication devices. Through the miracle of a worldwide web we can bridge great distances, share stories and images incessantly and instantly. These help inform, inspire and connect us, on some levels. They can help to capture and share stories and galvanize (or manipulate) the masses very quickly. When speaking of the obsessive drives of an action-oriented culture Merton’s words carry added weight in these times:

***We have more power at our disposal today than we have ever had, and yet we are more alienated and estranged from the inner ground of meaning and of love than we have ever been. The result of this is evident.***

As the first retreatants warned, we must be alert and aware, to handle technology with utmost care. In their farsightedness they predicted how “technique” can promise enhancements that actually endanger the development of human community. They could not have foreseen the degree to which electronic communications have shaped the behavior of people all over the planet. Bordering on addiction, many lives are obsessively linked to screens. Almost all of us carry a little pocket dictator. Though these are only tools, they bear a hidden costly burden. The disposable culture encourages us to cast away hand-held devices (mass produced in factories that endanger workers, with elements mined from vulnerable environments). Each plastic phone, laced with heavy metals, promises to poison the soil of garden earth for generations. Such costly commodities add to the clutter and confusion of our distracted days, and allow us to overlook realities and relationship right in front of us. Left to our devices, we are adrift in an ocean of information. Drowning in data, we are gasping for wisdom.

***And the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers (and sisters), we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.*** -Thomas Merton

The very notion of being one human family is under threat in this 21st century, for we are lacerated by competing interests and ideologies, as we well as national, ethnic and religious supremacies. Here communication technologies have been tooled to manufacture opinion, disseminate and inflate fear, and deepen division. Racism remains a pervasive-divisive reality on every continent. Slavery and the trafficking of human lives remains one of the three most lucrative industries across the globe.

Community is costly, it asks for time and space and a commitment to stability. Only the rootless are always on the go. Spend time in any bustling airport and you will taste the stale air of alienation. Where are we all going, what are we about? Why can’t we connect? Skimming the surface, endlessly entertained by factoids, we have drowned out the call and responsibility to being deeply connected and communitarian. Having diluted the meaning, responsibility, and efficacy of lived-community to digital picture books and video clips, we can claim to belong to a thousand low-cost pseudo-communities: the stamp-collecting community… or any number of interest groups.

The late Jesuit teacher Dean Brackley, schooled in the struggles of the Base Christian communities of El Salvador, offers this wisdom

***I’m not sure if anyone knows what is the best political strategy for making life more livable for all… but I do know that we need a critical mass of people who will respond to suffering, who are ready for long term commitment and who will make wise choices along the way. Without such new human beings… no amount of money, sophisticated strategies, religious programming, social education, even structural change, will make our world more human.***

Small-scale indigenous societies remind us that kinship is our most precious technology, that relationships provide the frame of reference for human beings and human communities. Without these we lose our bearings. When we engage in expanding personal relationships spirituality lights up a web of connectivity. This universal resonance with all Being links us to the Source. We need the desire and the will to pause, to be present, aware, open and alert. Spirituality as engagement provokes opportunities for presence, space for encounter and the reclamation of every kind of community. There is no surrogate for being rooted in the moment, no replacement for physical presence and no solidarity without it. It is about being here, and not trying to be everywhere. Spirituality that cannot engage the existential hunger for deeper and broader community only offers cheap substitutes that make no demands on us.

***How does spirituality draw you outside the familiar, inviting you to become communitarian, stretching your understanding and experience of neighborhood?***

1. ***A Crisis of Inequality and Injustice***

***In times like these, how much is enough for everyone?***

***Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will God not much more clothe you—you of little faith?***

-Matthew 6:28-30

In this toiling, spinning acquisitive world, these too-familiar words sound quaint, other-worldly, not at all practical! Just imagine what it would do to the economy if we took this Gospel to heart and brought this teaching to life!

Systematic injustice, the exploitation of poor people and the planet, is a not a new phenomenon. This is an old story. The Psalms and Prophets (Amos, Micah Joel Jeremiah and Isaiah…) reveal that selling the lives of God’s children for the price of a pair of sandals is nothing new.

Consider the thousand invisible touches lining the clothing we are all wearing today, especially our more intimate apparel. You may already be aware of recent stories about the conditions of garment workers in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and South East Asia. In these places they vie for the lowest paid workers to pad the profits of the fashion industry.

In our post-colonial, post-industrial times, exploitation has become much more efficient and omnipresent and is taken for granted (it is just the way the world works). Despite the professed ideological differences between East and West, operatively, the economy of exploitation has become firmly entrenched as a single global system. All compare and boast about the health of national communities based upon to the sole measure of Gross Domestic Product, and its shadow National Deficit.

In the Nineteen Seventies Brazilian Archbishop Helder Camara, who lived and worked in the favelas of Recife, wrote:

***Crushing poverty makes people sub-human***

***and obsessive wealth makes them inhuman.***

We have come a long way since the heady days following the Second Vatican Council, when prophetic theologies written from the perspective of the poorest clearly outlined spirituality with a preferential concern for those most sorely afflicted.

Humankind has benefited from technical advances in medicine and food production, some far more than others. Middle classes have arisen in cities all across the globe. However, the chasm between an obscenely wealthy caste and multitudes of impoverished people continues to widen. Transnational trading giants and the global financial system now hold powerful nations and governments hostage. Speculation and market engineering keep trade unrestrained by any sense of moderation or equity. Free to be unfair, market forces reflect their own brand of morality. Lack of any applicable global ethic or regulation leaves greed and gain as the primary engines for so-called human development. Those who have witnessed first-hand the true cost of low prices feel powerless before such overwhelming economic principalities.

***There are those whose being is possession.***

***There are those whose essence is giving.***

-Helder Camara

Religious institutions, to varying degrees, protest theologically against what Dorothy Day called this filthy rotten system. Many encourage their practitioners to engage in necessary works of mercy to ameliorate the misery of millions—by-product of the economic engine. Yet these institutions have largely failed to offer a robust social alternative or present a deeper prophetic critique. This is due in part to the reality that our religious institutions are, like us, compromised, part of the imperial forces at work. Christians are more OF this world than IN it. With few notable exceptions Christians and Christian communities look, live and shop like most other consumers. We are all, in some way, beneficiaries of the system, though it is not always apparent and we not always conscious of it.

***Sometimes the very walls of our churches separate us from God and each other. In our various naves and sanctuaries we are safely separated from those outside, from other denominations, other religions, separated from the poor, the ugly, the dying…The house of God is not a safe place. It is a cross where time and eternity meet, and where we are – or should be – challenged to live more vulnerably, more interdependently.***

-Madeleine L’Engle

The trickle down of a used-up, thrown-away and worn out earth is not the spiritual vision of a torrent of justice which Amos proclaimed. The Spirit of the Gospels offers another way of living together: a simpler, humbler, peacemaking beatitudes pathway to living in God’s domain. It has been said that the Reign of God is not difficult pick up, we just have to put everything else down. This narrower door offers a vision worth living and suffering for. We first must come to terms with the reality of enough, then reduce it. Living with less, so other might simply live, has become the most urgent and necessary spiritual practice for every single one of us.

***But strive first for the kingdom of God and God’s justice, and all these things will be given to you as well.*** -Matthew 6:33

1. ***A Crisis of War and Violence***

***In times like these, how do we envision a peaceable kingdom?***

***Then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of justice, quietness and trust forever. My people will abide in a peaceful habitation, in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting-places.***

-Isaiah 32:16-18

Nearly three thousand years have passed since Isaiah shared this vision and yet that promised reality is beyond the reach of so many on our planet. Just consider the power of that proclamation for the people of Israel-Palestine, Syria and Iraq, Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Somalia, Sudan, Nigeria, and Ukraine. Consider the cooler confrontations between China and Japan, North and South Korea, India and Pakistan. Add to this the wealthy and powerful nations with bloated budgets dedicated to the science and manufacture of weapons of mass destruction. Here technology becomes truly lethal: surgical strikes, drones, missiles, stealthy supersonic destruction. Terror and brutality have twisted religious teachings. Whipping up fanaticism they turn rape and suicide into destructive means to political ends.

***Peacemaking can no longer be regarded as being peripheral to being a Christian…***

***Christians today, if they want to be Christians, have to find the courage to make the word “peace” as important as the word “freedom.” There should be no doubt in the minds of the people who inhabit this world that Christians are peacemakers.***

-Henri Nouwen

In addition to these more formal forces of domination and aggression there are nations, regions and neighborhoods terrorized by corruption, brutal regimes, drug cartels, criminal gangs and the violent symptoms of addiction and neglect. The manufacture and selling of instruments of destruction remains one of the most lucrative trades in a world endlessly at war. The industries of entertainment have cashed in on our infatuation with violence: shooting galleries, electronic gaming, movies and comic books, all further the mythology of redemptive violence. So much energy is dedicated to defense and protection, inviting weapons into classrooms and churches, throwing fuel to the fire, and bringing self–fulfilling nightmares to life.

***Peace demands the most heroic labor and the most difficult sacrifice. It demands greater heroism than war. It demands greater fidelity to the truth and a much more perfect purity of conscience.***

-Thomas Merton

Planet Earth has become a dangerous place for any and every life form. Most often in any conflict the most vulnerable suffer most grievously: civilians, villagers, mothers and children, the elderly and infirm, the passers-by, and nature herself. Why such escalations of violence? Why suicide bombing? What leads young men and women to such self-destructive brutality?

***Every act of violence is also a message that needs to be understood.***

-Jean Vanier

The Christian response to violence is to embrace the cross, redemptive suffering. This too carries a heavy price; choosing to suffer rather than destroy***.*** The possibilities for a peaceable planet rest with the reclamation and engagement of a diverse yet shared spiritual heritage, deeply-rooted in God’s boundless mercy and compassion. Reclaiming this engaging, outward, spiritual orientation, leaning into the world, listening with the heart, redeeming rather than remonstrating, seeking to serve, to dialogue, and to deepen connection, all are sorely needed in times like these, if we are to walk toward Isaiah’s hopeful vision.

***They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.***-Isaiah 11:9

***What is the price of peace in times like these?***

***How do we disarm our hearts and dialogue with the ones we find it most difficult to hear or understand?***

1. ***A Crisis of Creation***

***In times like these, what is our place in the web of life?***

***And God put the human being in the garden of Eden to till and look after it.***

-Genesis 2: 15

Some years ago the New York Times reported the scientific consensus that we have entered a planet-wide extinction phase. What ought to have evoked widespread concern or dismay produced barely a whimper, buried several pages back amid crime reports, ads, and human interest stories.

This month the World Wildlife Foundation released alarming figures suggesting that global populations of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish have declined by an average of 52% in the past 40 years. Populations of freshwater species have suffered an even worse fall of 76%. The reason for of this die-off is degradation of habitat caused by human encroachment, exploitation of the last remaining pristine environments, and the intensified industrialization of agriculture and fishing.

Over the last 40 years, millions of metric tonnes of plastic have entered the oceans. Global production of plastic now stands at 288 million metric tonnes per year, 10% ending up in the ocean. Litter swept into drains ends up in rivers. The plastic straw you drop could very well end up in the Gulf of Mexico. Carried by ocean currents, plastics congregate in revolving systems called gyres (some larger than the State of Texas). There is evidence of plastic micro-globules in the remotest shorelines of the planet.

Add to this the universal recognition of serious and spiraling changes to global climate. Over the past 50 years our sacred, singular ecosystem is in deep distress. Earth has endured extinctions, cataclysms and natural disasters before. We are living through the first worldwide, human-made extinction. In every case the most vulnerable creatures and people bear the brunt of this unfolding catastrophe. The most threatened human population, Indigenous People, represent 4% of humanity, yet they are the guardians of 80% of the world's biodiversity.

***Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth***. -Matthew 5:5

There is no technological fix that allows us to maintain such parasitic lifestyles without destroying the life-support systems upon which we all depend. And none of this is new news. Merton corresponded with Rachel Carson over fifty years ago. Why are we not alarmed, torn-hearted at the desecration of sacred life, somberly seeking with all our hearts to live humbler, simpler lives, for our own sake as much as for the lives of our children’s children? It all seems so overwhelming. We seem irreparably addicted to our ways of living, convincing ourselves that this is merely progress.

***When was the last time you felt the rain between your toes and mud spackle your face?***

If you think meekness is weakness, trying being meek for a week! Children of the earth need organic not synthetic spirituality, to root us once again in the humus of our humanity. Our children suffer from nature deficient disorder. A vast majority of urbanized adults live completely out of touch with the rhythms of the seasons, cycles of the moon, movements of the stars, the raising of food, and the tending of the garden. Having lost touch with our God-given place in the holy web, we suffer from acute nature deprivation. Most of us can no longer see the Milky Way.

Synthetic living leads to soul-sickness. Having ejected ourselves from Eden, we wander the land of Nod, left to the limits and lunacies of our own devices. The results are felt most acutely by those people reduced to trolling the great garbage dumps, surviving on our wasteful excesses.

***Love all of God’s creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God’s light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything you will perceive the divine mystery of things.*** -Fyodor Dostoevsky

Living simply, in solidarity with tillers of the soil, growing food, consuming less, learning about enough…. This offers a pathway down to Eden, a way of protest, spirituality that gets us out our heads and down to earth. We are called to this not to save the earth, but to reclaim our very humanity.

If it were only up to us, we would have little cause for optimism. But we have great reason for hope. Earth does not belong to us. Nature, our first and best teacher, is a reflection of our abundant mysterious Maker. Creation is a miracle, earth is a life-maker, life is tenacious. There are very dark days ahead, but we are not abandoned. In the eye of this storm there is a presence and a pathway.

***What does it mean to return to the soil - the ground of our being?***

***What do we put down in order to live modestly, ruled by abundance rather than scarcity?***

1. ***A Crisis of Imagination***

***In times like these, how do we bear witness to a future full of hope?***

***Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old ones shall dream dreams, and your young ones shall see visions.***-Joel 2:28

Consider the imperial might of the ancient Mediterranean shaped by the witness of an unarmed peasant preacher from an obscure province. Who could ever have imagined that?

Social analysis can be a negative science; good at pointing out what is wrong. Peace and justice people can become expert at documenting realities of injustice and violence. Is it any wonder the media portrays bleak dystopias as the future for humankind? Mired in the way things are, focused on what is wrong, panicked by the depth of our predicament, we suffer from a paralyzing imagination deficit. Let us not confuse prophetic imagination, pointing to what can be, with sentimental optimism or apocalyptic fantasy. Prophetic imagining is the art of reading the clouds to discern the vision of what lies just beyond the horizon— the realization of what and who are called to be, a promising, hope-filled and life-affirming vision.

Imagine, if you will, what it might be like to actually live on “God’s holy mountain.”

Just a few “just imaginings,” just to get us started:

Just imagine…G12 figureheads being led by the hand by the street children of Mumbai.

Just imagine…migrant worker families being served a hearty salad picked and washed by

multinational executives.

Just imagine… nursing homes inundated by children and families, singing songs with their elders.

Just imagine… thousands of young people flocking to recruiting stations to join the Global Peace Force, offering emergency relief, rebuilding and restoration.

Just imagine…sports icons playing catch in the slums of Calcutta, and kick ball with the

street children of Soweto and Sao Paolo.

Just imagine…Africa declared the revered motherland of the human race.

Just imagine…inner-city homeless people welcomed into gated communities while shelters and soup kitchens are turned into retreat centers.

Just imagine…symphonies written and played in honor of street cleaners and garbage collectors.

Just imagine…televisions being turned into fish tanks to aid the restoration of our fragile

ocean environments.

Just imagine… liberated child soldiers given crayons and paint to decorate former Defense Departments as they are turned into Departments of Peace.

Just imagine…military tanks converted into septic tanks to hold and filter a precious payload of water.

Just imagine…missiles and rockets converted into climbing frames, slides and musical

instruments for children.

Just imagine…missile silos filled with grain.

Just imagine… a real “Free Market” where all human beings (like the other species of the

planet) once again receive food and water freely.

Just imagine…the oceans given a five year sabbatical.

Just imagine…sweat shops becoming sweet shops for children.

Just imagine...military training camps turned into enclaves where artists, poets, storytellers and craftspeople are trained, honored and invited to flourish.

Just imagine…street gangs becoming cleanup crews.

Just imagine…police officers dressed as clowns and taught the disarming arts of mime and juggling.

Just imagine… everyone dreaming dreams and seeing visions of what a world of peace and justice could be like.

Everyone of these imaginings is plausible and reachable. What we lack is the willingness, shared purpose and motivating Spirit. If the whole wide world can be engaged in destructive warfare, can we not similarly be galvanized around a common peaceable initiative? It would appear that our very survival depends upon it.

***For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.***

-Jeremiah 29: 11

Imagination is the first step in realization, an urgent need in this world that suffers from a

catastrophic failure of imagination.

***So…what can you imagine?***

***Still In the Storm?***

***Spirituality as Critical Engagement***

***As you come to know the seriousness of our situation, the war the racism, the poverty of the world, you come to realize it’s not going to be changed by just words or demonstrations. It is a question of living your life in dramatically different ways.***

-Dorothy Day

From the 1st to the 21st century, disciples have consistently confused being right with being just and being pure with being holy. And we have sought to separate so-called spiritual lives from the daily patterns and practices of so-called ordinary life.

The Spirit of Christ is not simply a theological concept. It is a liberating guiding, renewing, binding force that thrusts us into ever deeper engagement with life.

The abundant life Jesus promises is not achieved by accessing privileged information, private devotions or the rigors of mental abatement. It is received. It is graciously gifted. It is available to any and all who come together to walk humbly in the footsteps of our teacher in deliberate and quite different ways, in contradiction to the current of our culture.

In contrast to a culture of consumption, spirituality encountered in the Gospels, when practiced, emboldens us to leaven our community. Here, by our engaged presence (as much as by our activity) we bear witness, breathe possibility and raise the standard of loving in the world around us.

***You are not here on earth to verify,***

***Instruct yourself or inform curiosity***

***Or carry report. You are here to kneel…*** -T.S. Eliot

***Protest as Bearing Witness***

***When we stumble over the line, or are loved over the line, or, in our exhaustion, fall beyond our pain, what we feared was a fall to our death turns out to have been the next step.*** -Mark Nepo

So, how do we protest rightly in times like these? Let me suggest a few pathways.

***By returning to discipleship***, engaging the world in pursuit of the one thing necessary: the Christ we meet when…

Following the way of the cross, we are redeemed through shared suffering

Following the way of compassion, we are concerned for the welfare of our neighbors

Following the way of mercy, we extend forgiveness rather than blame

Following the way of non-violence, we listen to those who would harm us

Following the way of community, we widen our circles and shoulder burdens together

Following the way of simplicity, we share resources and live modestly

***By crying out and giving thanks***

Those who shoulder the Gospel yoke inevitably encounter two occupational hazards: cynicism (which succumbs to a sense of futility) and self-righteousness (which devolves into callous indifference). The antidote to cynicism is the practice of gratefulness as a daily response to all that life freely offers. The remedy to self-righteousness is “The Sorrowful Way,” the catharsis of lament that leads us into intimate solidarity with injustice, longing and lack.

***By calling out and calling in***

***Take us 'outside the camp', Lord. Outside holiness, out to where the soldiers gamble, and the thieves curse, and the nations clash at the cross-roads of the world...***

-George MacLeod

The Spirit pays no respect to social boundaries, castes or classes! We become a sign of contradiction when we cross the lines, undermine the walls and fences which society and religion have erected, in order to call out what we see as divisive and destructive, and call others in to community.

***He drew a circle that shut me out-  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle and took him In!*** -Edwin Markham

***By walking humbly***

***God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you***

***but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?***

-Micah 6:8

Objecting with our will and lifestyle to any and every kind of war, we humbly practice…

Conscientious objection to the violation of nature;

Conscientious objection to the tyranny of technology;

Conscientious objection to the assault on indigenous people, marginal cultures, migrants and lower income people;

Conscientious objection to the war on thrift and simple, sustained living…

***By standing at the foot of the cross***

-from the Latin hymn to Mary: “At the cross her station keeping…”

As you look out upon the world from the foot of the cross, who do you stand with, what do you see, how do you hold the world, together?

***Success and failure, ultimately, have little to do with living the Gospel.  Jesus just stood with the outcasts until they were welcomed or until he was crucified - whichever came first.***

- Greg Boyle

***In times like these, how else might we be called to bear witness to the pain and the possibilities?***

Let us sink back into silence.

Breathe in us… O Breath of God

In conclusion I offer poetic images from a Danish hymn by Kristian Ostergaard:

***That cause can never be lost nor stayed  
Which takes the course of what God has made;  
And is not trusting in walls and towers,  
But slowly growing from seeds to flowers.***

***Each noble service that has been wrought  
Was first conceived as a fruitful thought;  
Each worthy cause with a future glorious  
By quietly growing becomes victorious.***

***Thereby itself like a tree it shows:  
That high it reaches, as deep it grows;  
And when the storms are its branches shaking,  
It deeper root in the soil is taking.***

***Be then no more by a storm dismayed,  
For by it full grown seeds are laid;  
And though the tree by its might it shatters,  
What then, if a thousand seeds it scatters?***