

**SLD07.24.11 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost Sacred Communities Series**  
**Green Bough House of Prayer**  
**Psalm 55:4-8**  
**Matthew 28:28-30**

**“Green Bough: A Prayer-Soaked Place”**

**Ps 55:4-8**

My heart is in anguish within me,  
the terrors of death have fallen upon me.  
fear and trembling come upon me,  
and horror overwhelms me.  
And I say, “O that I had wings like a dove!  
I would fly away and be at rest;  
truly, I would flee far away;  
I would hurry to find a shelter for myself  
from the raging wind and tempest.

**Matthew 28:28-30**

Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

They say you can tell a lot about a preacher by what and how she preaches. Ostensibly, of course, we’re preaching the Word of God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind. And hopefully that’s usually true. But review any given preacher’s sermon topics and illustrations and word choices over time and they say you can learn a great deal about the preacher herself.

Well, today there’s no need to stretch to discern anything subtle, for in some ways, today’s sermon is all about me. What I’m going to suggest, though, is that it may be more about you, too, than you realize. For during this the fifth sermon in our Sacred Communities series, I’m going to talk about a community and retreat center to which I myself have fled to be at rest, toward which I myself have hurried for some fifteen years now to find a shelter from the raging wind and tempest – Green Bough House of Prayer.

I’m going to tell you what I know about Green Bough; I just need to be upfront

about how important it is to me, personally. How I don't have any sort of arm's length view of it. That I'm telling you about a place that is as important to me, as central to my spiritual life, as this church. Perhaps even more so.

Now the Green Bough House of Prayer is a place located quite literally in the middle of nowhere, in Scott, Ga., some two and a half hours southeast of Atlanta. Anybody here been to Scott? Karen has. And Elise, you have. There's a small, white clapboard church in Scott, Baptist, of course. And a handful of homes, and a blinking yellow light, and that's about it. Oh, and some fields of cotton. And corn. And sunflowers.

Scott's what you might call a "destination" place. That is, nobody accidentally wanders through Scott. You go to Scott, you gotta mean to. And once you do, why Green Bough's just up the road from the blinking light. On the right. Just after the community rescue station, and another cotton field. Only don't blink or you'll miss the moss-covered grey dove sitting on the metal mailbox, and the drive leading under the ancient pecan tree to the tin roofed shack – well, I don't want to say "shack" – let's say "abode." To the tin-roofed abode otherwise known as the "old house."

To the right of the old house, just in front of the carport, is another, smaller tree with a large, funky looking metal angel hanging from it. That's Dorre. My mom. I constructed Dorre of various rusty car parts and whatnot found under the old house on the occasion of the one year anniversary of her death. This was a very healing exercise for me. There's a paint-chipped sign hanging on Dorre's chest that says "Blessings." Fay gave me that, from the bookstore. And when I'm at Green Bough, Dorre also has flowers or berries in her wiry hair.

Now, out to the left of the old house, which, incidentally, is where the kitchen/dining room and bookstore are located, is the retreat house. This is a newer building of stained wood that houses 5 single rooms, 2 bathrooms, a common room with a “kitchen bar” and a sanctuary.

In the sanctuary there is a variety of places to settle and pray. If you want to sit Zazen style, there’s a corner with large pillows next to a big bare branch. If you want to kneel, there’s a kneeling bench over by a plant. If you want to pray with an icon, there’s one over in another corner behind a wooden screen. But most of the seating in the sanctuary is oriented toward an altar table, a pulpit (not for preaching but for reading scripture) and the most magnificent and evocative cross on the wall you’ve ever seen – well, *I’ve* ever seen – a huge thing made of old wood from the tobacco barn, and big ole copper flames made by a guy in Hawaii, with a big silver ring around in the center, that’s filled in with mysterious blue. There are painted vines growing up and around the cross and from its base there are laughing waves of water that cavort clear to both ends of the wall. And then around the room in a small band about waist high are painted beautiful doves interspersed with the words of Green Bough’s Rule of Life.

Sounds elaborate, I know, but it’s really quite a simple room. Except for that cross.

Out behind the Retreat House there are mown fields where you can walk, a labyrinth hidden in the center of one of them, and, over by Steve’s hermitage, a wooden swing hanging from a very tall oak limb. Come up and around toward the old house again and you’ll come to Fay’s little anchorhold where she lives.

Then there's another little house down the road down the road called Herb of Grace, and a couple more across the street called Joseph's House and the House of Peace, in which retreatants can also stay.

That's pretty well describes what Green Bough is like as a place. But more than a place, Green Bough is also a community. Founded by Fay Key and Steve Bullington back in 1987, the community of Green Bough is comprised of its little Board of Directors, its 50 or so Associates (of which I am one), and all the hundreds of folks who flown there to be at rest over the last twenty years.

You might say that the Green Bough community is rather loosely bound – people coming and going as they wish. Fay and Steve live at Green Bough full time, and I suppose their board meets a good 2-3 times a year. Associates who are able gather twice a year, in the fall and in the spring, though there's nothing "required" about attending. To become an Associate, one need only go through a period of study and discernment and then agree to do one's best to live according to Green Bough's Rule of Life. Although my secret motivation for becoming an Associate after five years or so of visiting Green Bough was that I might become one of the privileged ones who get to clear the table. (Ordinary retreatants don't get to help.)

Now we've talked about the Rules of Life a couple times already, defining them as covenants or promises to live a certain way. Not that every Christian community has an explicit Rule but many do. *We* do, here at Emory Church. *Our* Rule is found in what is called The Covenant of Emory Presbyterian Church. in which each of us pledges, in response to God's love and forgiveness,

to inspire each other to prayer, study, and stewardship,  
to cultivate an open, caring church

where diverse gifts are discovered, respected, and employed;  
to minister faithfully to the poor, lonely, sick, and those in need;  
to reach out, sharing our faith,  
inviting and welcoming others into our fellowship;  
and to seek justice and healing  
in the church, community and world.

This is Emory Church's Rule of Life – the promise we make to God and one another when we become a member of this church.

Well, the community of Green Bough House of Prayer also has a Rule for those who feel called to live by it. An abridged form of this Rule is outlined in our responsive Affirmation of Faith today. There are seven...we'll call them...aspirations...to Green Bough's Rule of Life. They are The Sacrament of the Present Moment, Prayer, Simplicity, Silence and Solitude, Spiritual Direction, Spiritual Reading, and Eucharist (or Communion.) It is this Rule, these practices, which actually bind and nurture Green Bough's community.

As you may already have surmised from its Rule, Green Bough is a contemplative community. A contemplative community is one in which the chief intention is to slow down, quiet one's faculties, consent to God's presence and action within, and participate in rhythms and practices that help one, through the Spirit of Jesus, commune with God. Me, I mostly image the experience as climbing onto the lap of God to rest.

Clergy of many different traditions find their way to Green Bough, but so do laity of every stripe. At Green Bough there's no distinction drawn there between clergy and laity, between Protestant or Catholic, between genders, among races. All who come are children of God, and all are there to climb on the lap of God, and rest.

So just how did this ecumenical, egalitarian oasis of the spirit come to be?

For the first time I asked Fay for a history of Green Bough and it comes as no surprise that the story of Green Bough is largely her and Steve's story.

Raised in the First Methodist Church of Swainsboro surrounded by "lots of (loving) mamas and daddies," from the beginning Fay experienced church as an extension of home.<sup>1</sup> But as she grew "up and out" through college, Duke Divinity School, the Ecumenical Institute, civil rights, the Vietnam war and the emerging women's movement, her views began to diverge sharply both from her home church and her first job with the Wesley Foundation of Clemson University, from which she was promptly fired. She got a job teaching a Title 1 kindergarten class, and then moved on to Head Start. But her heart was hurt and sought a time of healing and study at Pendle Hill, a Quaker center, where she was exposed to Gandhian philosophy and reconnected to rhythms of quiet and solitude. Two more church jobs followed.

Then, in Rome, Ga., Fay met a person who changed everything for her; an aged Catholic nun by the name of Sister Peter Claver with whom she eventually lived for a year and a half. Dorothy Day had been one of Fay's heroines for a long time and Sister Peter Claver, as it turned out, had been friends with her.

During their time together, besides praying the Daily Office and sharing a great deal of silence, Sister Peter Claver and Fay germinated together the idea together of founding a shelter for women and children. Fay became its Director and for 8 years ran what became known as "Hospitality House." It's a ministry that continues to this day.

However, early in her time with Sister Peter Claver, Fay perceived the notion that she was meant to start her own House of Prayer. Shortly after she began her work with Hospitality House, she met Steve Bullington, a Methodist pastor who also was drawn to

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<sup>1</sup> Paper about the history of Green Bough by Fay Key, shared with me in May of 2011.

a life of prayer, discipline and hospitality. They began to dream the dream of a House of Prayer together.

When Fay's mother died in the 1985 and left her some property in middle Georgia, Fay made a 30-day retreat based on the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. Steve finished up his church appointment, and together they moved to the dilapidated shack outside Scott, Ga. in order to "pray and be a presence of prayer, whether anyone else ever came or not." This was their first part of their calling. The second part was to provide a sacred space for others to come and pray.<sup>2</sup>

Fay enrolled into the residential training program in spiritual direction at the Jesuit Center for Spiritual Growth in Wernersville, Pa. Besides the art of spiritual direction, she learned also there about what the Catholics call "third orders" of lay people, people who wish to live according to a rule of life but who are unable to be residential members of a community. [For the Catholics, the men's order is the first, the women's order the second, and the lay order the third.] It was this idea that Fay interpreted into an opportunity for people, clergy or lay, to be engaged, if they were so called, in a more intentional relationship with the Green Bough community.

She writes, "The overarching vision of Green Bough was given to me whole before it was founded. The concepts of house of prayer, contemplative life, retreat space, spiritual direction; the ordering of the day around morning, evening and night prayer; the necessity of both communal and solitary time, the spiritual disciplines that compose our rule of life; the desire for Associates – all of these were in place before I left Rome."

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

In 1987, Fay and Steve began work on the property in Scott, where they “found shoulder-high weeds, one shabby old house and a caved-in chicken coop. By September of ‘87 Fay was able to move into the old house, and by December of ‘88, Steve was able to move into his hermitage. For two years they lived the spiritual disciplines of their Rule of Life, and then, on January 25, 1992, took the traditional vows of religious community: poverty, chastity and obedience. They then opened their door to others, to anyone who wished to come there to pray but also to those who wished to become Associates, those who would vow to live by the Green Bough Rule of Life, interpreting it for their own particular lives and settings.

“I was clear from the beginning that as a house of prayer, Green Bough was to be ecumenical,” says Fay. “...A place where people of varied backgrounds could come together...on equal footing...a place where lines are erased. The lines of division between women and men, laity and clergy, and among denominations or even religions, (though we are clearly and unapologetically Christian)...were to drop here. Prayer is a place of meeting,” says Fay. “We would sit at a round table.”

But who on earth would come to Scott, Ga.?

It was a fair question. Yet wonder of wonder, people *did* come, so many that Fay and Steve decided finally to build the retreat house with its sanctuary and single bedrooms. Over time, news of the authenticity and restfulness of the community spreading, the property expanded to include the additional buildings already named. Eventually, in order to preserve their initial calling of a life of solitude and prayer, Fay and Steve had actually to establish some limits as to when retreatants could come.

(This was only 4 or 5 years ago and was quite the shift for us all.)

This is Green Bough House of Prayer, “my” retreat center. But if you think I’m only one in this room influenced by Green Bough, think again. In the course of writing this sermon, I was amazed by the myriad ways that Green Bough has shaped not only my personal spiritual journey but my professional ministry, not only my individual life decisions but the tone and rhythms of our life together here at Emory Church.

It is at Green Bough where I have been exposed to the rich renewal of communion liturgy, and to the practices not only of centering prayer but of lectio divina, praying the offices, and spiritual direction. Often our communal prayers here carry language or tone drawn from the worship there. I am exposed to different hymnody there, different literature, a different way of being with God that is no busy. For fifteen years Fay Key has been my spiritual director, and as she has directed me, so I have directed us as a community.

It is the practice at Green Bough for Steve to read the life of the day’s saint after lunch each day, using Robert Ellsberg’s book *All Saints, Daily Reflections On Saints, Prophets and Witnesses For Our Time*. It was this “richly imagined collection of mediating figures in a spiritual communion of many faiths,” that gave me the idea a decade or so ago to explore more deeply the lives of saints, some canonized by the pope, some by me, in a sermon series each summer.

It was at Green Bough that I learned my practice of Centering Prayer.

Some of you may recall a sermon I preached here back in the summer of 2006 about Father Thomas Keating, the avuncular Trappist whose life work has been to promulgate Centering Prayer, a method of contemplative prayer that prepares us to receive the gift of God’s presence. It was at Green Bough that I was introduced to

“Uncle Tommy,” as I fondly call Father Keating, during a nine-month Centering Prayer course offered there.

It was at Green Bough that I met an Episcopal clergywoman who guided me as to how on earth to do our first Blessing of the Animals, our first liturgical Palm Sunday service.

Green Bough is where I first experienced the Wesleyan Covenant Service we here at Emory also share at the beginning of each year. Indeed, since 2002, New Year’s Day, the Feast of the Mother, Mother of God, (they’re all closet Catholics down there) has been my own vowing day. Except for last year on account of the Meacham wedding, I have prayed in virtually every New Year at Green Bough (and then lit sparklers, sipped champagne, and sung “Arrange and Rearrange” with that old reformer, Pete Seeger).

We’ve had staff retreats at Green Bough. It was to Green Bough that I went two years ago for help with my discernment around staying in ministry, committing to Emory Church, and then *re*-committing. And then re-committing *again*. (You have no idea how much those Steve and Fay know about you all!)

And not only were Fay and Steve a part of the commission installing me here at Emory Church the first time, believe me, they’re are a *big* part of keeping me here. Honestly, I’m not sure I could survived, never mind fallen in love with, parish ministry in the absence of Green Bough.

I try to get down to there 4 or 5 times a year because a sojourn there helps me remember who God is, and who I am. Have you ever gotten so famished you don’t even feel hungry anymore? That’s how it often is for me by the time I get to Green

Bough. Sometimes I don't even recognize the extent of my spiritual thirst until it starts getting quenched.

I also get huge amounts of sleep – sometimes I don't even know how tired I am until I pull into that sandy drive. Also, the food there is great – there's even a Green Bough cookbook. Delicious and healthy meals are prepared in and on the bare bones of a 40's kitchen about a foot and a half from the table around which we all eat.

“We live as a Christian community with a rule of life and a daily round of prayer,” writes Fay. “...We keep the lamp alight for weary pilgrims. We create a little space of peace and balance in a world of frantic activity – a place of prayer. A reminder that we belong to God, that's God's life and love flow through us, and that we are privileged to serve God's world in its need.

She describes Green Bough as “a prayer-soaked place for slowing down, being still, listening attentively to Scripture, to nature, to one's heart, to one's life, eating a good meal, hearing a poem, participating in Eucharist, being present through the moments of the day. ...A place and time re-awaken to the Source of life whose current runs through all our days, making the ordinary, extraordinary; turning the water into wine.”

And, oh, how thirsty we are, I am, for that wine.

To the glory of God. Amen.