

Christian Community News

SEPTEMBER 2009

Dear Christian Community, Dear Friends,

How can we find the Christ working in our everyday lives? This question is fundamental to our movement and to our own personal lives as we seek ever and again to deepen our connection to Spirit. And while there are many answers to this important question, I am particularly fascinated with another very similar question: How can the Christ find us? Because God is looking for us. He wants to find us and be recognized by us in everyday life. This reality is made clearer through a parable that Christ gave in the Luke gospel.

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one earthly human being who transforms his heart and mind than over ninety-nine self-righteous human beings who believe that they are fine the way they are and need not transform.

This parable can reveal to our contemplative thinking that the Shepherd is Christ himself and that he is seeking those human beings who are willing to transform themselves in order to be in communion with God. In other words, God wants to find us. And He finds us through our own ability to recognize him working in and through our own "Becoming."

But how?

As soon as I was ordained, I was sent to South Africa. The city of Johannesburg, where the congregation lives,

is widely known as the most dangerous city in the world. Upon arrival, I began to experience fear, existential fear welling up in my soul. I would walk to and fro from the church to my house, often at night, and fear would try to seize my soul. In every shadow and unfamiliar sound the thoughts would fill my head: "Who's there?" "Will I be mugged today?" I kept asking myself why this particular challenge was coming up for me so strongly. It soon dawned on me that this fear was a *call*. This fear was a call from the Good Shepherd to "transform my heart and mind." This fear was a call to develop my own courage and capacity to overcome the fear of harm and death. You see, I realized that every challenge and hardship that we face is not some abstract effect, a misfortune or worse, punishment, but actually a call from Christ. This call is a call to grow and become more of a true human being. Every challenge and every struggle actually are opportunities to develop as human beings whether it be growing in courage, patience, understanding...or countless other capacities.

The voice of Christ is calling out to us today saying "Become!" God wants us to become true human beings who can love in freedom through transforming ourselves. Whenever we experience life throwing us a curve ball or a deep hardship, we can begin to recognize the voice of the good Shepherd calling out to us to grow.

Christ is calling out to us all now and in every moment. And we can recognize his call by learning to understand his voice.

• *Rev. Jonah Evans*

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A newsletter for the Spring Valley Congregation of the Christian Community

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On July 5, we welcomed Rev. Jonah Evans, and his wife, Katie, to our congregation. Rev. Evans, who began his priest training in Chicago and was ordained nine months ago in Germany, is joining Rev. Carol Kelly as our second resident priest.

For those of you who were not able to be present for his official introduction, Rev. Evans has contributed a piece for this issue about the life journey that has brought him here. He also hopes to be meeting each congregation member in person in the coming months. Please be sure to introduce yourself.

As always, your contributions are welcome; please contact me anytime with your ideas. The next issue should come out sometime in spring 2010.

• Lory Widmer, Editor

Introducing Rev. Jonah Christopher Evans

I was born on September 4, 1978 in Denver, Colorado, by caesarean; I was two and a half months early and weighed just three pounds. I spent the first month of my life in an incubator.

At the age of two, we moved to Kansas City so that my father could study at the Christ Unity Seminary. We spent two years there and then moved to Seattle, Washington where my father had his first congregation as a pastor, and I began Waldorf kindergarten.

In 1986 my family moved to Sacramento, California. This was my father's second congregation.

I entered the second grade at the Sacramento Waldorf School where, except for a public school adventure in the seventh grade, I would attend and eventually graduate from high school. Shortly after we moved to Sacramento, however, my parents divorced. This was one of the most painful experiences of my (short) life. I was nine years old. That same year, I was baptized at The Christian Community in Sacramento.

In 1992, after returning from living in Oregon with my father and experiencing a public school for my seventh grade year, I re-enrolled in the Waldorf School and graduated eighth grade there. Also that year, I was confirmed. I have a strong memory of the priest's hands on my head.

While I went through high school, I was only really concerned with two things: sports and my girlfriend. This would all change when I had a serious knee surgery in 1995 and my girlfriend left the school. All of a sudden I found myself in bed, healing, and with nothing to do. So, I began to read. I found that I had a deep interest in Eastern thought and dove into its philosophy. My interest in learning continued into university. Throughout my time at university I was also studying Anthroposophy.

Shortly after I began university, I came across the work of Georg Kühlewind and Friedman Schwarzkopf. It was

through them that I was able to bridge my interest in Zen philosophy with Anthroposophy. The question "What is knowledge?" was then burning in me. I joined a study group on Rudolf Steiner's *The Philosophy of Spiritual Activity* and found it just what I needed. From then on, I sought to connect what I was learning through Rudolf Steiner with what I was learning in the university.

As my interest in Anthroposophy grew, it became clear that in university, I would not learn what I really wanted to learn. I wanted to learn about the spiritual foundations of the human being and the earth. I didn't find this in natural science, psychology, or psychotherapy.

Around the age of twenty-two, I began working with *How to Know Higher Worlds* and *Guidance in Esoteric Training* and began to make time in the day for meditation. After working with some of these exercises for some time, I began to have different experiences. One of these experiences was a perception of myself as being so full of sickness that I knew right then that I would not be able to heal or redeem myself on my own. It was an experience of being helpless in the face of

my own being. It was shortly after this experience that I was drawn back to the Act of Consecration of Man, nine years after confirmation. It was in the communion that I found the medicine for my sickness. I had found my spiritual home in The Christian Community.

In October of 2003 I was married to Katie Ketchum by the State of California. That next spring we were married by Sanford Miller in The Christian Community. During our marriage process, I became interested in the possibility of the priesthood for the first time.

Also in 2003, I graduated from university with a BA in Psychology. After this I wanted to explore the practical side of the world of psychology, so I became a counselor at a mental health home. I worked with people suffering from schizophrenia and drug addiction for one year.



Although I learned a great deal from this experience, it was through this work that I became aware of the limits of psychotherapy and psychiatry and thus questioned my future in it.

During this year I visited the Gisela Wielki and the Chicago Seminary and immediately felt that I needed to study there. So, that summer, Katie and I packed up our car and drove 2500 miles to Chicago to begin the adventure of the path to the priesthood.

Working with the leaders and the students in Chicago, I learned much. There were many “inner storms” for me in Chicago and I had to strengthen that part in me that could navigate a storm without losing my feet or the way.

Directly after Chicago, we moved to England and I began a practicum with the priests, Nicolas Wijnberg and Michael Kientzler in Forest Row. I could tell from the very first day that it wouldn't be easy. Mr. Wijnberg was (and still is) a very active priest who, from the very beginning, expected me to take on almost everything (this was also due to a tragedy in his personal life). From the Christmas play to taking care of insurance issues for the church, from caring for the dead to creating a youth group, I could feel my capacity for taking the responsibility for a community grow.

Originally, I wanted to finish my studies in Chicago. This was the plan for me up until about half way through my practicum in Forest Row. I started to question my desire to return to Chicago when I began to hear many people, including priests, comment on what a handicap it was for certain priests not to be able to speak German.

The more I thought about it, the less I could hide from the destiny question that pressed down on me. “Do you have the courage to go to Germany and continue your studies in a foreign language that you do not know yet?” This thought actually terrified me.

Then one day, I was driving along with my wife in East Sussex and the feeling just hit me. I knew I had to muster up the courage to confront my fear and go to Germany. And I knew it would be a huge challenge.

My first few weeks in Stuttgart were horrible. It was so strange; almost all of what I had relied upon was gone. I had no language, and with that my personality was all but lost. I had hardly any money. My wife had stayed in England in order to pay for my studies. I felt alone and naked—like a baby or a small child.

Then, as the dust began to settle, I began to notice that a feeling began to make itself known. The “feeling—understanding” in my heart spoke something to the effect of “this is my path, and no matter where it leads, I know that it is the path that I need to be on.” This feeling or inner voice became more and more my ground. Even without all the things I normally relied upon, this feeling gave me stability. I am so thankful for that experience because I was able to become aware of this “feeling for destiny” in a way that I believe I would not have had I gone back to Chicago.

On December 7, 2008, I was ordained in Wuppertal, Germany. Being born into the priesthood has been one of the greatest joys of my life and I am so excited to work for the future of our movement.

Ten days after I was ordained, I was on a plane to South Africa. Normally one has at least four weeks to digest and prepare for a new community after being ordained. My destiny was different. My new birth into the priesthood couldn't wait.

If you remember, it was like that at my earthly birth as well. Two and a half months premature. Caesarian. Stayed in an incubator for the first month. Strange how these things work.

Johannesburg was also a bit of an incubator. As soon as I got there I realized that my California driver's license had expired. And you really need a car in Joburg. It's a car city. There is just no public transport and everything is far apart. So I lived and worked on the church grounds. Don't get me wrong, I had no complaints, there were three houses on the property and a huge, beautiful garden.

Driving around Joburg was an interesting experience. It is a dynamic mixture of beautiful trees (it is the largest planted forest in the world), and security gates. Everywhere you went you were met with green branches hanging over barbed and electric wire. And the polarity does not stop there. For example, some of the most luxurious, largest houses I have ever seen sit beside townships of extreme poverty. Or a blind beggar with no shoes on his feet, pleading to a man in a Ferrari. Johannesburg is a place of dynamic contrast wherever one looks.

This dynamic energy exists in the community as well. I don't know if I have ever experienced such an interested or active community as the one in Joburg. Even though I was sent there to help in difficult times, the community is far from defeated. There is almost one study group per day! The board of trustees is vibrant and dedicated. And Reingard Knausenberger (Coordinator for South Africa) has really maintained integrity in all aspects of the sacramental life. She is a real pillar in our movement. I had to admit to being very impressed.

Joburg was a wonderful community to get my feet wet in. They really welcomed me fully, even though I am an American! My wife Katie has also found her experience here as surprisingly pleasant.

Even though I couldn't wait to get started in my new community in Spring Valley, New York, spending my first six months in South Africa was an experience of a lifetime. From experiencing Christmas in summer, to the wonderfully vibrant countryside Waldorf School in Linpopo, the journey was tremendously rewarding.

Today, Katie and I are more than happy to call the Spring Valley congregation our home. I look forward to all that we can create together!

• *Rev. Jonah Evans*



Share the Secret: Fall Family Retreat

I love the sound of the word “retreat.” It connotes to me a getting away; kind of a shared secret by those who are saying “back off” to the everyday world for at least a while; a slowing down, an opportunity to connect more with ourselves and with others; a chance to explore the spiritual aspects of our very busy lives; a time of fun, good food, rejuvenation.

Well, it’s not a secret! The Christian Community Fall Family Retreat is September 18-20 and you are invited. Last fall my family and I attended and we loved it. The drive to Cornwall is easy (around an hour), the retreat house is comfortable, the grounds are beautiful. And the best part is your whole family can be part of the weekend experience.

The shared cooking and cleaning up allowed me to talk with people I normally might just say “hello” to in passing. Other highlights for me included singing, evening campfires, a little hiking, nature explorations and Carol’s leading of discussions on topics relating to the Christian Community.

If you didn’t come last year, treat yourself and your family this September. And if you came last year, I guess maybe you can “re-treat” yourself.

• *Jill Bieber*

SPACE IS LIMITED!

Sign up today so you won’t miss out!



Thanks to the Board

Do you know who arranges for the grass to be cut and the snow plowed on our church property? Or what was involved in mortgaging the building? What kind of insurance do we have? How is the financial support of the priest determined? What happens to priests who have retired?

Before I was asked to join the Board of Trustees in 2004, I didn't know any of these things. And to be honest, I never gave them a thought. I was grateful that the church was there—for me, personally; I didn't consider what it actually took for it to be there for everyone. But being a board member sounded like a good way to express my support and gratitude for the church. And so, in complete ignorance of what I was agreeing to, I signed up for *one* year as a board member...a year that quickly became five, for the last two of which I served as secretary.

One huge aspect of the Board's task, as evidenced in the questions above, is providing a physical home for the sacraments, and for the priests who celebrate them. In our world this takes money, and the Board has many difficult financial questions to ponder. Daily needs and demands—priest stipends, insurance, utilities, maintenance, insurance, taxes—clamor for attention and resources, but the future also needs to be taken into account, so that emergencies don't take us by surprise, and growth can be fostered. This is not an easy task, especially when the month-to-month income is largely unknown in advance (please pledge!).

The relationship between our congregation and the wider movement also has a financial aspect. Each congregation is financially independent, but is asked to contribute to a fund for retired priests, whose support needs to be shared among more than one congregation. Other purposes for such a fund need to be imagined, along with ways to make it strong and healthy while fostering the health and growth of the individual congregations.

As a person who spends as little time as possible managing my own finances, I found these rather large monetary questions bewildering and intimidating at first. But I recognized how important and far-reaching they are, and was grateful for the opportunity to grapple with them, with the help of those more experienced in this work.

There is much more than dollars and cents to be considered, too. The spiritual needs and strivings of the congregation must be sensed and accommodated, and individuals and groups met in appropriate ways. The priest cannot do this alone, and we often discussed what kind of new events, programs, and activities should be planned. The Fall Family Retreat described in this issue was one of these events, and it took a long time from the initial idea being fielded before it became a reality. Without the hours that the Board puts into their monthly meetings, as well as the extra time that they spend in research and organization, this

and many other events would never have come about.

We shouldn't take the very existence of our congregation for granted. In my years on the Board we were struggling with how to make the transition from the initial phases of building the church to the current reality, which is quite different from what was originally envisioned. The need to have a mortgage on the building and to pay it off quickly was not originally part of the picture, for example, but was an urgent need that we wrestled with for many months. The whole story of the origins of our chapel is long and complex (and perhaps a topic for another article), and even though I was part of the Spring Valley congregation from the beginning, I had no clue of what was going on behind the scenes. It was not a straightforward process, and it's almost a miracle that our beautiful chapel, now so seemingly solid and "just there," was even completed.

Indeed, it was only through my experience on the Board that I realized how fragile what we have here is, and how dependent on our support. It is not an established institution, with large endowments and massive foundations of culture and tradition on which we can rely. It is a new, emerging initiative that needs every one of us to contribute our time and energy and resources in order to exist. This fragility, though, stands upon the very strongest basis: the work of Christ in the world. When one recognizes that, being asked to become a co-worker in any sense is truly an honor.

I would urge every concerned person to consider serving for a term on the Board if invited (an initial term is three years, which may be renewed). It is an opportunity to learn, as well as to serve, and it is a privilege to try to stand responsibly in this position of trust. Another group you may consider joining is the Initiative Group, which has taken on some much-needed organizational and event-planning tasks, without having the financial and legal responsibilities of the Board. This is a wonderful and very rewarding way to contribute in the social realm. A third group that urgently needs to be formed is a Building Group that will focus on improving our community space and priest housing. Contact Rev. Kelly or Rev. Evans if you are interested in any of these groups.

Finally, I would like to thank the members of the Board of Trustees who served with me during my term, and still do so today: Peter Wiesner, Susan Shurtleff, Christiane Landowne, and Jill Bieber; also new member Rafal Nowak; Marianne Zimberg, who stepped down after nineteen years that bridged the transition from New York City; and Rev. Carol Kelly, whose manifold responsibilities I can only stand in awe of. I am so pleased and excited that after the Board's last few years of struggle and questioning we have come to the point of being able to welcome a second priest to our community. May we all work together with renewed courage and joy this autumn season.

• Lory Widmer

Spring Valley Congregation Board of Trustees

The Board meets approximately once a month to consider the issues involved in giving the Christian Community a home on earth in this particular location, including its financial basis. If you have a question or a matter that you would like to bring to the attention of the Board, please contact one of the members:

Rev. Carol Kelly, President • 426-3144

Susan Shurtleff, Treasurer • 426-2251

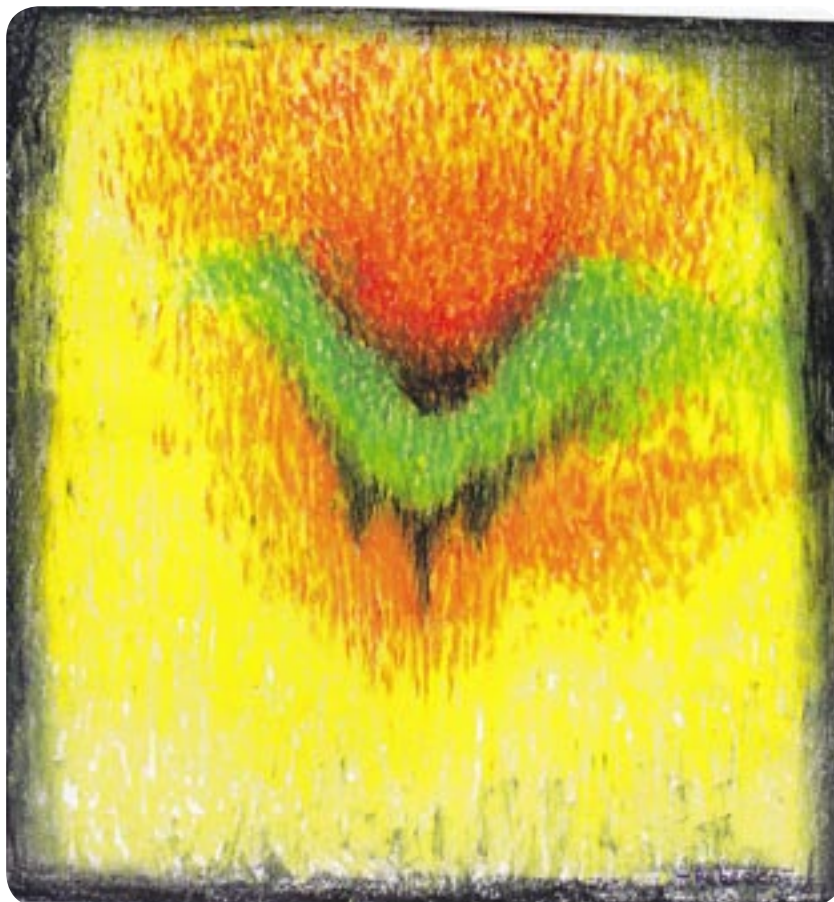
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Dragon by Rebecca Renold

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