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I don't know about you, but it's been a little difficult for me to remain optimistic about the world lately. It seems like a new atrocity greets us every time we turn on the news, and the polarizations in both our world and nation sometimes seem irreconcilable. We remember now, with a dark kind of nostalgia, previous eras when we thought the world situation was as tense as it could possibly get. Even some of the most optimistic, unflappable senior citizens I know, now shake their heads and say, "I cannot even think about the problems your generation has to try to solve."

On the other hand, they say it is always darkest before the dawn, so maybe there really is opportunity in all this. In today's reading from Romans, Paul says, "You know what time it is! How it is NOW the moment for you to wake from sleep!" Maybe this is all another jangling of the cosmic snooze alarm, asking us, as the human species, to wake up! And what are we to awaken to? Paul says it's love. And in some ways, maybe it really is as simple as that. When we follow every situation back to its source, they say we operate either out of fear or out of love. *and*

If we don't choose consciously, too often we default to fear. But in response to that natural human tendency, Paul speaks the good word: "Owe no one anything except to LOVE one another," he says, All of the commandments, he reminds us, are summed up in the simple commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. Love God, love your neighbor as yourself. The rest is commentary.

What if this era of darkness and depression, of Isis and Israeli-Palstinian deadlock, of Syria and the Ukraine and Ferguson, of ongoing ideological gridlock in our own government and polarization in our families and our churches and our personal relationships... What if it is all a giant, cosmic alarm clock, ringing ever more loudly because we humans collectively and

individually keep hitting the snooze button? What if now really is the time to awaken? How do we do that? Well, how about this? Let's try evolving.

I personally believe in a God who works through evolution, a God who was very much present at the big bang, and has been infusing and guiding the long, slow process of evolution ever since. Indeed, there is a whole school of theology which believes this, called process theology. And my take on it is to believe that we, as a human species, are in the process of evolving, if you will, in a spiritual sense. Maybe the next phase of human evolution will be an evolution of our minds and hearts, where we finally reach a substantial tipping point, and no doubt in fits and starts, as evolution always happens, we will rise out of our tribal ways of thinking, out of our judging, black and white ego minds, out of that very human tendency to cling rigidly to our own conclusions, our judgments and opinions and thoughts, and instead, learn to recognize them from a broader, more peaceful, more expansive place of love. Maybe then we will learn to operate from love more of the time, rather than from fear; from flexibility rather than rigidity; from open mindedness rather than defensiveness.

One of my favorite writers is a spiritual thinker originally from Germany named Eckhart Tolle. He writes the following in his book, A New Earth on which we will be starting book studies this coming week. "When faced with a radical crisis, when the old way of being in the world, of interacting with each other and with nature doesn't work anymore, when survival is threatened by seemingly insurmountable problems, then individual life forms or a species will either die or become extinct or will learn to rise above the limitations of its condition through an evolutionary leap. Responding to radical crisis that threatens our survival, this is humanity's

challenge now. The dysfunction of the egoic human mind, recognized by all spiritual traditions, is for the first time threatening the survival of the planet.”

By the term “egoic mind” Tolle is not talking about anything new or weird, even though I’ll grant you that it sounds a bit “new agey”. It’s really just different language for what Judeo-Christianity traditionally calls self centeredness: the total preoccupation, some would say obsession, that we all seem to have with our own thoughts, judgements, opinions, desires, etc that the creation story of Adam and Eve tries metaphorically to convey. “Don’t eat the apple” God said. And what did they do? They immediately started overthinking it, over analyzing, arguing. “Well, the snake said...” “Well, what I think God really meant it...” and pretty soon they were taking sides and defending their camps, and polarizing themselves from each other, from the natural world and from God. The exact opposite of “love God, love your neighbor as yourself.” And again, metaphorically speaking, everything has been off kilter, we’ve been seeing through a glass darkly, ever since. Traditional Judeo Christianity calls this “the Fall of Man” and says it is responsible for original sin. Another way to say it is that we see through a glass darkly because we are stuck within the confines of our ego minds as a starting point, and we don’t even realize it. If you will take a look at the graphic on the insert in your bulletin, I think it does a good job of explaining it visually. The first picture is our natural, unconscious orientation to the world. We see from within the confines of our own thought systems. The second picture represents what Tolle might call a more spiritually evolved orientation; or what traditional theologh might call a redeemed state of mind where sin is overcome by grace, and we see no longer through a glass darkly but now with clarity and spiritual maturity.

But it is human nature, at least in our current phase of evolution, to be unconsciously stuck within the polarized confines of our own little, thought systems. And when we operate from there, we do not listen to one another in order to understand, we listen in order to reply- to win. You know that drill and so do I: not really listening but marking time while you think of what to say next. Indeed it has been said that the essential problem with human communication is that we do not listen to understand. We listen to rebut. To win. We don't even realize we are doing it, but we do, because our own separate, little ego minds need to be right and they think that if they are proven wrong, somehow our very existence is on the line, and so it feels like we should go down to the death even in meaningless, little arguments. In those moments we are operating out of fear that the little false kingdom of our creation is collapsing. Fear. Not love. We've all known people who simply cannot admit it when they are wrong. Heck, at times we've all been that person. You know that feeling, you know how it feels to be locked into that mentality. Its rigid and constricted and angry and full of adrenaline, but ultimately it's lonely and deadening. And when we're caught in that grip, we'd almost rather die than let go. We'd rather be right than happy, to be proven victor than to be at peace. And so we defend and defend, try to prove ourselves with complicated mental gymnastics, and eat the apple all over again, watching the chasm between us, God, and each other widen further still.

We do it in our individual lives, in our social circles, our workplaces, our churches and communities. We don't want to be this way, although by its nature, ego mind does sometimes nurse its wounds because there is self righteous pay off in doing so. Still, we don't consciously choose this orientation to life. It's just how the ego mind works until we finally start to catch a glimpse and understand better. And until then, the same basic dynamic gets played out in our individual lives as well as on the world stage, where we create nemises, enemies on a global

scale, who have also made enemies of us. And ideologies clash and become still more and more rigid and contracted, and it all seems to be spinning out of control.

Felix Carrion, on our UCC national staff, said it this way: “ I, for one, would like to get rid of all the tribal gods of our own creation. Really, they don't exist. They are a projection of human madness. Let's evolve... But there is something that "never was born and never dies." Without it we would not be here. We existed in and with it and will exist in and with it when this form fades. This is God, the mystery, the elegant principle, love. I want to know and feel, in and through the wonder of consciousness, higher intelligence, miraculous senses, boundless and daring inquiry, the wonders of creation, communion of love and friendship, compassionate tears, human heartedness, the depths of sorrow and pain, forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption, the "glory of the flower," the dance of light and darkness, birth and death. I'm enjoying God! Its just not the one I grew up with.”

The alarm clock is jangling. Its asking us to evolve. To lessen our attachments to our own compulsive thinking, our sacrosanct opinions and our cherished certainties, our judgements and addictions to the old ways; it's asking us to put aside quarreling and jealousy, all those activities of ego mind, and, in Christian terms, to put on the Lord Jesus Christ- which is really just another way of saying put on LOVE; put on higher consciousness, put on wholeness! That's what Jesus was and is all about! He came to teach and to flesh out what it looks like when a person operates from intimate connection to the loving source in every moment; to show us what it's like when one sets aside the little g god of their own ego mind, and operates from the deeper place of love, of God. And he asked us to follow in that same way. To let go of the lower way that comes naturally to us, and commit ourselves to a higher way. You might say he was the first manifestation of a newly evolved kind of humanity. Paul says the first born of the new creation.

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And in Romans, Paul says that the whole creation is groaning and longing, like a woman in childbirth, for this kind of humanity to become realized in us, to evolve and reach a tipping point so that the same kind of consciousness that was in Christ is scattered widely across the earth. Christ calls us all to wake up, to grow in that same consciousness, to die to our little ego selves and rise with him.

And then, scripture says, we shall see a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth will have passed away. And we will hear a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. God will dwell with them and will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

The snooze alarm has been jangling for a long time. Now is the time to wake from our sleep.