

## Just Love – Lent 2C

You do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves. Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine. Meanwhile the world goes on. Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the landscapes, over the prairies and the deep trees, the mountains and the rivers. Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again. Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting--over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

*Wild Geese* is by Mary Oliver. She tells us about life well lived and how for each of us love means something different. Love is both different, and very much the same. At the place where we are in doubt about whether or not we will be satisfied, safe, excited and repaid enough, we are all the same. “Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.” And “let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.” The poet captures in a few short phrases the exact point of confluence of the rivers of hope and despair that run through all of us.

I come from Missouri. I grew up not far from both the Mississippi and Missouri rivers that come together just above Saint Louis in an awesome surge of fast, deep, brown water. The sight of these two enormous, powerful forces mixing together to form the lower Mississippi is humbling and enthralling; we would often go down to the levee and just look

at the river, especially at night. There is a strange and compelling combination of excitement and comfort one can have just by watching the water. There is excitement at being so close to a thing so strong and unstoppable, just like the sea is here, especially at this time of year when the waves come right over the massive breakwater. The comfort had something to do with the timelessness and immeasurability of the river; we could be as safely insignificant as we wanted to in the presence of such a vast cosmic being. T.S.Eliot, who came from Saint Louis, called the river “a strong brown god.”

We can be aware of the confluence of our emotions. The rivers of hope and despair surge together in each of us from moment to moment as we encounter the circumstances, the people, places and things of our lives. The waters mix, and we become a combination of our faith and our fears. Mary Oliver is telling us that, if we share our fears, our moments, days, even years of doubt and pain with each other, we will indeed be set free to love what we love, and love it well.

Saint Paul also tells us what Mary Oliver does, he says, ‘Imitate us! We are the ones who live in expectation of salvation. Our humiliation will be transformed from an earthly body to a glorious one, if only we will stand firm in love. And what is our humiliation? This is what Mary Oliver means when she says. “Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.” For each of us, it is different, but we all have it. The Christian life is a way of being in the world successfully, fruitfully as Jesus says. Stay close to the vine of love, because the world is likely to gobble us up otherwise. There is nothing else that can save us.

The psalmist is talking about this too, when we sing, “Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.” Every time we act on the fear and despair that flows through each of us, it is we who bear the false witness, against our own hope and faith, against our soft bodies, against our better selves. Again and again God tells us we don’t have to do this. We don’t have to do this, and we are forgiven when we inevitably do. Again and again, we hear the covenant renewed: ‘Your descendants will be as numerous as the stars!’ Again and again, like Abram, the sun goes down, a deep sleep falls upon us, and a deep and terrifying darkness descends.

What does God do about this penchant of ours for returning to darkness, despair and shame? Why doesn’t God just part these waters for us, as for the Hebrew slaves and Moses? Why can’t we behave? Jesus is so frustrated with his people: “Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings? Yet you were not willing!” But this is our nature. We are both spiritual and animal. The spirit is indeed willing, but the flesh is often even more willing – to do whatever it feels like doing.

So time and again we want saving. We are not saved once and for all from the enemy within, the assailants all around. Time after time the power of the Spirit comes and fills us with new hope, even in the face of our despair. Then for a moment we are willing. We are honest enough to share our stories of despair, and this humility overcomes the humiliation. It enables us to be the people we want to be, if only for brief moments and love freely without counting the cost or the payback.

Perfection is for Jesus Christ alone, who has the inside track, the DNA, the nature of perfection. But for the rest of us, the examples of not just people like Saint Paul and Sister Theresa, but anybody who, if only for a day or two, behaves the way we would like to behave – these examples can be our nurture, our hope for lives well-lived. We don't have to be good, says Mary Oliver, but we do have to share our fears, and we do have to let ourselves love.

However well we succeed at setting aside our stuff-worship, whatever the vast or tiny measure of our works of charity, no matter how many times we have to get honest and start over, we can be sure that the river of hope will continue to carry us. The way to live life well is to know full well how much we all have in common and then share our unique selves with others anyway. We can be sure that God will forgive the gap between what we are and what we would be. We can know that our sometimes fleeting desire to stop living for and by ourselves is God's spirit, who will provide the power of hopefulness and the glory of right action.

So when we sing that “We worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory,” we are reminding ourselves and each other that our creation, our salvation and our inspiration come from one source and one source alone – at once the cause and the home of all that is – the power of desire for goodness, the power of love, the power of reconciliation, the source of our supply, and the end of all our meaning.

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