

“Good News and Bad News”

Rev. David Gregory

January 20, 2019

Second Sunday after Epiphany



First reading

from *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus* by Peter Gomes

The radical nature of the Jesus story is not in the way of his death ... nor is it even in his glorious resurrection, to which we instinctively respond when strangers fill the churches on Easter. The radical dimension of the Jesus story has to do with the content of his preaching, the nature of the glad tidings that he announced to be at hand.... This is the good news that was bad news to many in Jesus’s time, so much so that at the beginning of his preaching they nearly killed him, and at the end of his ministry they succeeded.

Second reading

Matthew 7:24-28 New Revised Standard Version

“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came and the winds blew and beat against that house and it fell— and great was its fall!”

Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

This is one of those Sundays when circumstances have displaced my well-made plans. Those who come to Stone Soup are well-versed in my process, how early in the week I choose readings and work my way through where I think I’m going on Sunday, then when Thursday morning comes, I get in the room with twelve or twenty people who visit the readings with me, and we proceed to make the most delicious soup out of them. Out of that soup usually spring better ideas than the ones I previously had, and thanks to all of you, by Sunday I usually have something to say.

This week I was thrown an additional curve with the passing of my personal poet laureate, Mary Oliver. I've made no secret of my love for her work. How well I remember one of my early online interviews with the search team, when I was asked if I would be comfortable using some alternative readings in worship services, you know, like Mary Oliver, for example. "Um, yes" was my response. "I think I could make that work." My biggest problem has been finding people other than Mary Oliver to read, alternating other beloved poets like John O'Donohue, the prose of important writers, observers of our times, names you've become familiar with, like Ed Bacon, Diana Butler Bass, Brian McLaren, or Robin Meyers. But there's something about the poet, *this* poet in particular, that calls to me in ways that others may not. Perhaps it is the imagery of her Ohio childhood, her connection to a piece of the earth which I know so well. Maybe it's her affinity for Whitman and Thoreau—poets that my grandparents, Charles and Esther Starbuck, used read to each other while I played with my toys on the floor of their library. Or it could be Mary Oliver's beloved Provincetown, that incredible place at the very tip of Cape Cod, a place to which I've returned countless times, a place deeply grounded in the history and nature of this land, and at the same time other-worldly.

More than ever we need our poets, not for entertainment, not for escape, though they may provide both of those. We need our poets because they are the ones who describe the indescribable. They give us the beauty of words when there are none. Like the biblical writers, they take what is transcendent, and although they cannot define it for us, they can tell us what it resembles. We then take their metaphors and set about finding our own. And this, I think, is the goal of contemplative spirituality; the deeper we go, the farther we go, and there just isn't another way to do it. I can sense that in Mary Oliver's poem "Journey."

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice—
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.

It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do—
determined to save
the only life you could save.

Over the last year I have been making a case for something that for me seems terribly important, and I repeat it like a broken record: We are in the midst of a New Reformation. It is not something we've chosen. It tends to be a little frightening at times, and it requires of us that we become adept at using both sides of our brain. Life is a dance between right and left, masculine and feminine, light and shadow. The theology by which we live our lives is vitally important. We come to this current reformation with the understandings and underpinnings of all that has gone before. Language is important. History is vital. Words matter. But it is also essential that we take those words and discover their meaning for ourselves. And meaning requires metaphor. It turns us all into poets, actually. Without metaphor, words are just the mechanical pieces of grammatical machines.

In today's gospel portrait, we have the metaphor of rock versus sand. If you're going to build something that lasts, you're much wiser to build on something solid like rock, rather than on the sands which shift with storms or tides. In this case the solid foundation is not a system of belief. We don't hear Jesus say, for example, "If you hear these words of mine and believe them..." you'll be building upon the rock. He says, "If you hear these words and *do* them." It is about our practice.

This is what younger people around us are trying to say: Yes, your churches are pretty, but your institutions aren't. I'm not interested in what you believe. I want to know what you're going to do. This is the essence of the New Reformation. "Faith without works is dead," according to James, the James that grew up in the same household with Jesus, the James who led the early followers in Jerusalem. "Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works." "Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving

yourselves.” The last Reformation sought to do away with James, for its message did not fit the idea that we are saved by faith alone. This reformation restores our focus to hearing, seeing, and doing. It’s not about arguing a position, it’s about living a life, the end of which is not about what arguments you’ve won, but about what good you’ve done.

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

—Mary Oliver

