

**Being Present. Loving Life.**

June 25, 2023

Rev. Elizabeth River

**Readings**

Become Your Life

Barbara Brooks

It is following the dream  
that the journey begins.  
And aren't we all dreamers?  
Who is willing?  
Imagination says yes.  
What is holding you back?  
Be the one that you are.  
Listen, breathe deeply,  
Become your life.

Remember

Barbara Brooks

I want to remember this earth  
voluptuous in ripe afternoon  
summer heat, dribble of juice a  
ripe peach sweet. Remember  
licking our fingers blackberry  
purple. Air dense with jasmine  
blue morning glories climbing  
crazy on vines, wild clover tickling our  
feet. I want to remember this earth every  
setting sun, clouds golden pink until our  
indigo starry sleep.



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I am honored to be your minister today, and want to give you a short caveat before I offer you what I have! My spiritual formation has been happening my whole life and it is still going on. I've been a member of this beloved community of CCC for about twenty years, and the great blessing is that I am welcome here just as everyone is, even though (and here's the caveat) I am not purely Christian! In fact, I'm only *sort of* Christian, much less purely, since my many inner voices speak many languages, are all well-read and highly articulate, and often argue with each other about who is smartest or who is

right. Luckily, I have learned to survive these little clashes, and in fact to learn from them. Occasionally. They help me ask questions a lot, as life continues to be complex, sometimes overwhelming, and often astonishingly gorgeous! Thanks to CCC and all of you, my spiritual and intellectual formation continues. Richly. Every single week! And so I call myself an interfaith person, and serve people as and where they are on their path.

Sometimes I think the shortest and simplest path to God is the one offered by the poets, especially when I come upon one word or phrase that just knocks me over like, “your one wild and precious life,” or “you don’t ever let go of the thread.” When I was invited to preach today, I turned to the poetry file (another lesson I learned from CCC), and what caught my eye was some poems by Barbara Brooks! I immediately wanted to read all of them to you and just let everyone sit and bask in the richness of the feast! After re-reading them, I chose two for our feast today.

Barbara was a long-time member of CCC who died not too long ago and left us with a legacy of her poetry in addition to her contributions to community life. Her poetry has reconfirmed for me the truth that poets often bring forth shining jewels that lead us just as surely to Divine awakening as any scripture, sermon, hymn, creed or sacrament, and one of the very best things about poems is that they themselves do not appear like teaching tools, or proselytizing screeds! As I said: jewels. Not all poems, of course; we have to spot the jewels!

I want to say something about love. This message is titled “Being Present. Loving Life.” for a reason: My core belief is that *love is the grounding force of life, of all of life*. We humans are creatures of love, and also, we have fantastic capabilities: creativity, imagination, evolution, compassion, perspective, orchestration, common sense, great wisdom, engagement, awakening, exploration, delight (to name a few). In all these activities, and even in times of no activity whatsoever, love is the stream flowing underneath it all. It stimulates us to choose what we choose to do and be, who we turn towards and away from, how we feel most like ourselves, or most NOT ourselves. It’s the driver wheel of our seeking and searching, our exploration of both our inner and outer worlds, and it bestows meaning on everything we experience, both the things that bring us joy, happiness and satisfaction as well as the things that dishearten, repel, or threaten us. While we may not often be thinking of love that way, whether we’re even conscious of love’s place in all of it, it is nevertheless central to everything we are.

Our lives are actually lived in each present moment, whether we are paying attention or not. I’ve gradually come to realize that when I am not aware of what is happening in the very moment I’m in, then I’m ... somewhere else: in the past, in the future, or in a fog! And when I come out of that, I’ve missed something. I missed what you said. I didn’t hear the birds. I did not taste the food. You know what I mean. Anyway, I’ve come to understand that I need to be paying attention as best I can each day. To be present. And being present, paying attention – that is how love is both given and received.

The first poem from Barbara is “Become Your Life.” Isn’t *become* a wonderful verb? Of course, we are becoming, right this minute! Michelle Obama had the wisdom to title her memoir *Becoming!* Amen, Michelle! I guess every memoir could have that title. Luckily, we have Barbara Brooks – poet and not a memoirist – who is both wise and succinct. I know that my life has been one of becoming, even though at many places along the way I felt I had arrived and that everything was perfect! I wanted to halt

everything right there and try to hold on to what I had. But eventually I stopped thinking that way. Now, slowly slowly I am allowing my soul and spirit and body all to have voices at the negotiating table! I whip out my calendar and see that I've planned to go to church, have lunch and catch a movie with friends, and in one second my body jumps right in: "NO! Absolutely not!" My soul says, "Remember, honey, all you need today is church." And I say "Okay. You're both right. Just church and back home." And Spirit gives this tiny committee a standing ovation! *Becoming*. An act of love. I am becoming who I really am one day at a time.

I officiate weddings, and I usually send the draft of the ceremony to the couple a few weeks before the wedding for their editing and approval. Last summer I married a couple and I had written their ring vow thus: "*I give you this ring with all that I am and all that I have.*" And the couple, in their edit, amended it to say, "*I give you this ring with all that I am and all that I have and all that I am to become.*" Wow! How did these young people have all that wisdom?

The second poem is "Remember." Ah-h-h-h-h! This poem is so luscious and rich, like a fine meal of delectable eats – not too much, not too little; just enough to satisfy, to please, to fill us with a sense of the abundance we are blessed with. It speaks of "my cup runneth over." It's almost dazzling in the flavors, sounds, aromas, sensations all around, and it is also an admonition to *remember*, to be fully present with all of these moments and experiences, and then to take pleasure in those memories. Remembering the richness of our life, our world, can move us right into gratefulness. Think now of some experiences like those in the poem that *you* remember. This pleasure, this being present in moments like these, is part of the practice of loving life! May we all remember, thank, and celebrate such moments, such experiences, hold them in our hearts' memory banks.

Right now I invite you to close your eyes and call up one of your favorite memories, perhaps from a long time ago. Find that memory, and then see if you can remember – not just what happened or who was there, etc., but something specific about your sensory experience. What did the air feel and smell like? What were you hearing? Describe that perception. What flavors were there? What sensations on your skin? Heat or cold? Remember your body's response to any of it. Stay with this for a minute. This is a living memory. This is the gift – one of the gifts – of being present when something is happening, being right with it, paying attention, drinking in everything about it. It is something you can cherish and hold for all time.

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I just wanted to repeat some of the stunning words and phrases from this poem that are utterly stimulating, inspiring, soothing, and delightful – generous! Hold them in your mind.

Time to interject a bit of scripture here: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God* (the gospel according to John 1:1). Sometimes we encounter the words of people whose *word is with God and is God*. We tend to know it when we hear it.

If this were a workshop, and you all had notepads on your knees and pencils in your hands, I would invite you to make tiny poems of your own, loaded with rich words like these involving all your senses. But this is church, not a workshop (thank heavens), and all we need to do is share in this time of appreciating the beauty, brilliance, richness, and most of all, the sacredness of poetry! And in particular, the poetry of *this* poet, Barbara Brooks, who offered the world her glorious words, born of her own times of Presence, of Loving Life. We give thanks for the gift of your words, Barbara.

Amen.