

Thanks Living

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N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

"Tell me, what is it you are going to do, with your one wild and precious life?"

Those famous words come to us from Mary Oliver.

I admit, it may seem ironic or nostalgic to read a poem called "A Summer Day"¹ on Thanksgiving weekend.

As the leaves drop from the trees and the temperature falls, I read it with some urgency...thinking I'd better hurry up before the first frost.

Come to think of it, I've heard that poem quoted with urgency before.

More than once, in my circle of friends and in my own heart, I have thought about my *"one wild and precious life"* with some anxiety.

"Oh no, what is it I am going to do, with this limited time that I have?"

"I'd better do something grand and important, perhaps even write an important poem!"

I'm not sure that's what Mary Oliver had in mind.

You see, the poem "A Summer Day" is not about ambition or goal-setting at all.

It's not really about what we sometimes call "purpose."

I think it's a poem of thanksgiving. A poem of gratitude. For a grasshopper.

¹ Mary Oliver, "A Summer Day," *New and Selected Poems: Volume One* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 94.

"The [one] who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down, who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes...the one eating sugar out of my hand."

Mary Oliver writes, "I don't know exactly what a prayer is. I do know how to be idle and blessed."

She knows how to feel blessed, simply by being alive and by paying attention.

Two hundred and fifty years earlier, another poet, William Blake, called us "To see the world in a grain of sand, and to see heaven in a wild flower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour."

Like Mary Oliver, he saw that by paying reverent attention to the small and precious moments of our lives, we can have what might be called a "religious experience."

We can lose ourselves in joining with the Whole.

We can enter into holy communion.

When we slow down to notice, to honour, to savour the precious life in front of us, our own "one precious life" is transformed.

Taking each morsel of life experience and savouring it fully--moving our jaws up and down in our miraculously particular ways--we nourish our bodies and our souls.

We take the raw material of life, and through our attention and our gratitude, we make it holy...because it makes us whole.

It seems to me that the man Jesus likely understood that, when he encouraged his community to break bread together with loving attention.

We don't know his exact words. But his intent may have been something like this.

"Take, eat. This is the body, the substance of life. This is the means by which the work of love will continue in this world."

And so it is, with every sacramental meal, in every religious tradition.

This individual meal. *This* local gathering. *This* particular loaf of bread.

This is the means by which we find our purpose.

When we pay attention, we are likely to notice that the "meal" in front of us-- and by that I don't mean the bread and the cider but the Whole Enchilada-- comes to us with precious little work on our part.

Mary Oliver asks, "Who made the world?" and the question hangs in the air as all great poetry allows it to do.

Even as we leave the question unanswered or unasked, we know that our presence here, our very existence, has nothing to do with our own accomplishment.

Thousands of songs begin with the words, "I woke up this morning."

Simply noticing that we did wake up is an awakening all its own. It's a cause for thanksgiving and humility.

Dag Hammarskjold, the poet and UN Secretary who died in 1961, captured this perfectly in a haiku:

*This accidental
Meeting of possibilities
Calls itself I.²*

It is a tiny morsel of a poem...containing an eternity of wisdom.

We could ponder that all afternoon.

Albert Einstein once wrote, "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."

More recently, a famous Canadian author said that "People who believe in miracles do not make much fuss when they actually encounter one."

² Dag Hammarskjold, quoted in Roger Lipsey, "Stillness in Action: Reflections on Dag Hammarskjold," *Shambhala Sun*, November 2013.

That wise observer was Alice Munro, the recipient of this year's Nobel Prize for literature.

You'll be pleased to learn that she once taught Sunday school and served on the "creative worship committee" at the Unitarian Church of Victoria.

In all of the tributes that have been written about her over the past few days, everyone has noted her loving attention to ordinary human lives—especially those of women, and especially here in Southern Ontario.

She takes the everyday stuff of life—the bread if you will—and through the alchemical process of creativity, turns it into something new and nourishing.

The particular words spoken in a faltering marriage. The specific tasks to be done at the turkey processing plant.

Regret and longing, flesh and bone and feather...she shows us how these details fit into the story. The universal human story.

In reading her, we see the inherent beauty in own lives, such as they are.

That appreciation, that gratitude for life as it is, can be something we cultivate. An essential part of our "purpose."

Recently a scientific study compared people who kept a gratitude journal with others who did not.

The results are written up in a book called "Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude can Make You Happier."³

Researchers found that the people who make gratitude a daily practice are more energetic and productive, more optimistic and less depressed.

In other words, if we want to live a life of purpose, saying "thank you" might be a good way to start.

Some people express gratitude through prayer.

³ Robert A. Emmons, *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007).

The contemporary Christian writer Anne Lamott calls “Thank You” one of the three essential prayers, along with “Wow” and “Help!”⁴

But whether or not you frame it as a prayer is not the most important thing.

As Mary Oliver wrote, “I don't know exactly what a prayer is.”

The more important thing, it seems to me, is that we receive what comes our way with loving attention.

That we fully take it in, allowing it to nourish and transform us in mysterious ways that we cannot fully control.

When we do this, we honour all of life.

Whether we turn this morsel of nourishment—this grain of sand that is our life--into a poem, a short story, a lunch program or more just piece of legislation...

The act of being grace-fully nourished joins us to the whole world.

To the here and now.

To the wild and precious life that comes undeserved to us, with every breath.

We come to the table of life in times of thanksgiving and fullness...and times of hunger and emptiness.

All of those times are food for the soul and spirit.

“For all that is our life, we sing our thanks and praise, for all life is a gift, which we are called to use, to build the common good.”

When we take each morsel...and give thanks for it...we do not know how it will be transformed in us and by us.

We do not know how the poem will end or what other life it will nourish.

⁴ Anne Lamott, *Help Thanks Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (New York, Riverhead Books, 2012).

We do know that this bread of life, this cup of blessing, is here before us now.

A precious gift.

For which we give thanks.