

You do not Have to be Good – 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.”

This poem is by Mary Oliver, who died in January. Rereading her work is one of the great pleasures. In *Wild Geese*, she tells us about life well-lived and how for each of us love means something different. But while love is different for everyone, it is also very much the same, and binds us all together. At the place where we are assured or in doubt about whether or not we will be satisfied, safe, excited and well enough repaid, we are all the same. “Let the soft animal of your body love what it loves” and “Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.” The poet captures in a few short phrases the exact point of confluence of the current of hope and anguish that make up the rivers 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 flow of fast, wide, 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 was a strange and compelling combination of excitement and comfort one could have just by watching the water. There was excitement at being so close to a thing so strong and unstoppable. 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.

For Sister Prejean, author of *Dead Men Walking*, a chronicle of her work with Death Row inmates, love meant specific and measurable acts. She wanted to ‘walk the walk.’ Her awareness of her own and society’s revulsion by death row inmates was the river that brought her meaning. Loving society’s enemies became for her an actual life’s

work, rather than an occasional and idealistic impulse. In accompanying them to their executions, she said, "I wanted my face to carry the love that tells them and every one of us is worth more than our most terrible acts." This is not a debate about the wretchedness of the death penalty, nor is it a debate about the possibility of repentance for unspeakable acts. It is a living example of someone who rides down the river of Jesus' bidding, borne by her own humanity, a mixture of faith and fear.

Saint Paul also tells us what Mary Oliver does, saying, '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? "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine." For each of us, it is different, but we all have it.

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.' As the old prayer goes:

Blessing, light, and glory surround us
and scatter the darkness of the long and lonely night, for
we know the divine Spirit dwells in us.

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, like he did for the Hebrew slaves and Moses? As Cole Porter put it, "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, with new humiliation even in the time of our overweening pride. Then for a moment we are willing. We are honest enough to share our stories of despair, and this humility carries the day. 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. For the rest of us, the examples of not just people like Saint Paul and Sister Prejean, 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, but we do have to share our fears; 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 current of hope will continue to run through 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 as creatively as we can. Be ye 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 will, who will provide the power of hopefulness and the glory of right action.

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