



The New England Church Pulpit

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Hidden Pencils

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Judeo-Christian
Psalm 104

Bless the Lord, O my soul.
O Lord my God, you are very great.
You are clothed with honor and majesty,
 wrapped in light as with a garment.
You stretch out the heavens like a tent,
 you set the beams of your chambers on the water;
 you make the clouds your chariot;
 you ride on the wings of the wind;
 you make the winds your messengers;
 fire and flame are your ministers.

You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
 they flow between the hills,
 giving drink to every wild animal.
By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation;
 they sing among the branches.
From your lofty abode you water the mountains.
The earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work.

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle,
 and plants for people to use
 to bring forth good from the earth;
 and wine to gladden the human heart,
 oil to make the face shine,
 and bread to strengthen the human heart.

May the glory of the Lord endure forever;
 may the Lord rejoice in his works.
May my meditation be pleasing to God,
 for I rejoice in the Lord.
Bless the Lord, O my Soul.
Praise to God!

Tao Te Ching 4

The Way is like a well:
used but never used up.
It is like the eternal void:
filled with infinite possibilities.

It is hidden but always present.
I don't know who gave birth to it.
It is older than God.

In her poem "Sometimes," poet Mary Oliver offers us a path for meaningful living:

Instructions for living a life:
Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it.

These twelve words succinctly capture the mindset of the Psalmist whose words of praise and joy come from a deep and abiding and keen astonishment of the world's beauty. This ancient poet channeled Oliver's instructions for living thousands of years before she wrote them: pay attention, be astonished, tell about it.

Oliver, who died January 17, encouraged us through her insightful poetry to "pray [i.e. live]... vibrantly eternal lives that begin now." Carol Davis Younger observes that we often skip to the third sentence before experiencing the first two. That is, we tend to tell about things that we haven't experienced, or paid attention to, or been astonished by. It is too easy to just repeat what we've heard from someone else, and assimilate that into our psyche as if it were our own.

Language, says Oliver, is not so much a means of self-description as it is a door—or rather a thousand opening doors—past ourselves. Words are a means to notice, to contemplate, to praise, and thus, to come into power." In her poem "Praying," she told us this:

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones: just pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

Oliver reminds us of the import of our scripture in Psalm 104 today, namely that God isn't chiefly interested in organized religion, per se, but in the natural, ordinary, everyday practice of paying attention and being astonished. We have missed the point if we believe that God's home is the church exclusively and that the world is a barren place full of lost souls in need of being saved, as Barbara Brown Taylor says. If anyone needs to be saved, it's ourselves who need to be saved from the idea that God sees the world the same way we do. What if your child's music recital or ballgame

is as promising to God as the Sunday school class at church? What if God could drop a ladder absolutely anywhere as a way to find God without regard for the religious standards some folks see as the only way to find God?

To prepare for the unexpected insight or the astonishment when least expected, Mary Oliver used to hide pencils in the trees of the woods she walked with regularity. That way, she said, she could jot down any idea that came into her head as she observed it or was astonished by it. And while we might never write a word of poetry or record our astonishment on paper, the image is vital to our abundant living. We must keep pencils hidden in our mind and hearts, as it were, to remind us to pay attention, to be astonished at the everyday, ordinary events that so often pass us by, for in these God is hiding in plain sight.

In her book *An Altar in the World*, Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that anything can become a sacrament, which is a visible sign of an inward and spiritual connection. A common stone, a winter tree, a bird singing, weeds in a field, weeds growing in our garden, a child playing, a child crying, a warm coat on a blustery day, an ice cream cone on a sweltering day. The possibilities are endless because everywhere we look there are hidden treasures of ordinary experiences that usher us into the sublime.

Robert Frost captured this concept in his poem entitled “Dust of Snow:”

The way a crow shook down on me
The dust of snow from a hemlock tree
Has given my heart a change of mood
And changed some part of a day I had rued.

The aggravation of a clump of snow going down the back of the neck on a cold wintry day paradoxically becomes his salvation. Pay attention; be astonished; tell about it. If we keep our eyes and our minds open, even the most frustrating experience can become a doorway into the divine.

Laura McKane Chioldi, who died one week ago yesterday at age 48, had among her papers this poem by Mary Oliver, entitled “When Death Comes.”

“When death comes.....
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."

The practice of paying attention, says Barbara Brown Taylor, is the antidote to just visiting the world, and is as simple as looking twice at people and things you might just as easily ignore. It is as simple as turning off the television to learn the song of a single bird. Paying attention requires no equipment, no special clothes, no greens fees or personal trainers. You do not even have to be in particularly good shape. All you need is a body on this earth, willing to notice where it is, trusting that even something as small as a hazelnut can become an altar in this world.

With any luck, you will soon begin to see the souls in pebbles, ants, small mounds of moss, and the acorn on its way to becoming an oak tree. You may feel some tenderness for the struggling mayfly the ants are carrying away. If you can see water, you may take time to wonder where it comes from and where it is going. You may even feel the beating of your own heart, that miracle of ingenuity that does its work with no thought or instruction from you. You did not make your heart, any more than you made a tree. You are a guest here. You have been given a free pass to this modest domain and everything in it. (Barbara Brown Taylor. *An Altar in the World*)

And so we can live with astonishment, paying attention, and telling about it as in the words of the Psalmist: may my medication be pleasing to God, for I rejoice in the Lord. And with Lao-tzu: The way is hidden but always present. Amen.

Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious and loving God, high above our imaginations yet deep within our psyche and our soul, we seek you in this sanctuary so that we might be saved from ourselves. Small creatures are we, too much absorbed by trivial busyness and our own selfish pursuits, obsessed with temporal details at the expense of eternal values. We come to this place, not because you reside here exclusively, but in this place set apart from our workaday world, we can center ourselves in your life-giving way and be better citizens of our world when we leave this place. Let saints and scientists, poets and composers speak to us of the possibilities of broader horizons.

Give us keen eyes, a sensitive heart, and a listening ear to the wonder and excitement of life that surrounds us each day. Often we are too preoccupied to hear the music of the sparrow or see the beauty in ice and snow. We find ourselves irritated rather than astonished by the antics of children being children. We are so caught up in our own agenda we forget to pay attention to the joy that takes us to holy places in the simple pleasures of eating a meal, or lingering to chat, or petting the cat or taking the dog for a walk.

Save us from our narrow interests and cares. Help us live out our lives in others' lives, knowing that there is no good that comes to each that should not come to all and no good that may come to all that should not be the care of each. When we pray, let us remember that we begin with OUR:

our father, our mother in heaven, forgive us our sins, our trespasses, give us our daily bread. Cast down all prejudice across all barriers that ancient days have built of race, creed, class, nation, religion, sexual orientation, and lifestyle that love may flow in the river of your grace.

Throw the warm cloak of your greatness around us and be the unseen strength that inspires us to do great things for those around us. Astonish us in the ordinary; guide our eyes and our hearts and our ears so we may pay attention to life's beauty in all things, all creatures great and small. Instill within us a divine hope that we may be a blessing to those around us. In the spirit of the Christ we pray, amen.