

Like a Tree
Jeremiah 17:5-8
February 17, 2019

A month ago today,
the world lost a beautiful voice,
the voice of a gentle poet.
She died in Provincetown, on the Cape,
where she had lived a quiet and unassuming life.
Renowned, beloved, Pulitzer-prize winning,
but most at home when, well, at home -- taking walks on the beach,
taking in the beauty and the power of God's creation --
and writing about it.
Her name was Mary Oliver --
and you may well have loved her work as much as I did.
I'm beginning this sermon by reading to you what is perhaps her most loved
poem -- *The Summer Day*:

*Who made the world? Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper? This grasshopper, I mean
- the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.*

*I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass,
how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed,
how to stroll through the fields, which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me,
what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?*

It's that one line in there that has always stuck with me,

has struck me as having something to say about how we're meant to live:
I don't know exactly what a prayer is --
*I **do** know how to pay attention.*

For Mary Oliver,
who was a deeply spiritual person,
it was that *paying of attention* to creation that was her way of honoring the
Creator.
Her way of praying.

In another poem she wrote this:
The dream of my life
is to lie down by a slow river and stare at the light in the trees --
to learn something by being nothing a little while
but the lens of attention.

I'm sharing Mary Oliver with you this morning for a couple reasons.
First, simply to honor a voice whose words touched and moved three
generations of readers.
And secondly, because the scripture that I had [Eloise/Helen] read to you
just now has something of a Mary Oliver quality to it.
It is a verse of great beauty --
and if Mary Oliver's dream was to lie by a slow river and pay attention to the
light in the trees,
then it seems that the writer of this verse --
Jeremiah himself --
must have done just that one day.
And it seems that Jeremiah, too, must have been one to pay attention to
what God was saying to him in the beauty of Creation.

Because the poem he then wrote --
the poem that Jeremiah wrote almost three thousand years ago -- was this:
Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.
They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.
It shall not fear when heat comes,

*and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.*

I love this, this ancient poem --
I love its gentle reminder that to be rooted in God's love
is to be like a tree planted by water,
never fearing, never anxious, never ceasing to bear fruit.

I first noticed these verses many, many years ago --
It was in a time of sorrow.

We were planning a funeral service, for a remarkable woman whom some
among you would still remember -- Ann Carter.

And even if you never knew Ann, you've still caught a glimpse of her spirit
and brilliance when you've witnessed her grandson play piano for us here --
Alex Beyer.

Ann was a woman of indomitable spirit, deep faith, and incredible courage.
She was the first woman in the United States licensed to fly a helicopter,
and a member of the Women Airforce Service Pilots in World War II.

She later was stricken with polio --
but though that disabled her physically,
it didn't stop her from living fully.

She was faithful to this church, immersed in this community,
and elected to practically every governing body in town.

Ann was a woman for whom the word 'inspiration' was far too small a
description.

And when I sat down with her daughter Misty Beyer
to plan her service,
Misty said this to me about her mother.
The roots ran so deep, Alida, she said. Her roots ran so deep.

And as I later prepared for that service, as I prayed to know what to say
about a woman I'd so loved and admired,
Misty's words kept echoing in my mind. *Her roots ran so deep.*
And from somewhere in my memory the words of Jeremiah came forth:
Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust IS the Lord.

They are like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream.

So on the day I stood here to speak about Ann,
it was Jeremiah's poem I shared.

And then I said this:

This surely was Ann:

*A tree planted by water,
her roots running deep into the stream:
not fearing when the heat came,
her leaves staying ever green;
in the year of drought not anxious,
and never ceasing to bear fruit.*

This was Ann:

*soaring with strength into the sky
roots running deep into the strength that fed her.
Polio may have gripped her body close,
but her life was without limit,
tall and courageous and strong,
lifting toward the sun,
never ceasing to bear fruit.*

Because that was Ann, to me, to us all:
one whose roots were fed by the strength of God's love,
by the grace of God which sustained her.

One whose life bore fruit.

In our midst she grew tall and strong,
and in her shade we too knew strength.

A year ago – a year ago this week -- I found myself again speaking to grief,
again in a room of sorrow,
again remembering a woman of strength.

And it was to that passage in Jeremiah that I turned again.

Leigh Thackaberry, for whom we'd been praying here for many years,
had died to this life
after a long journey with cancer.

She'd grown up here,

been a member of my youth group,
served as a Junior Deacon,
come to Appalachia with me again and again,
served as a youth group leader.
Her faith was real and true and deep,
her faith in a God who loved her utterly and completely
and who walked beside her on every step of her journey.
She knew that God intimately.
Her roots ran deep into the living waters of Christ's love.
At her church in Vermont,
Leigh and her wife and their sweet little girl
were known for their love and hospitality:
Leigh lived her faith.
Her roots ran deep into the water of God's grace.

At her funeral service at that Vermont church, a service which Leigh had
designed with care,
there was a children's message for the many kids who were there,
and at the end we all stood and sang the Christian folk song,
I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together.
And we were. We were church, together.

And when I spoke,
I shared Jeremiah's poem, the poem that spoke to me once again:
*They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.*
This was Leigh, I said.
*Leigh's roots ran deep into those living waters of hope..
She was fed by a Spirit of Love which sustained her,
year in and year out;
in heat, in drought, she drew her strength from a place deep within,
a well of courage, a spring of hope.*
That's what I said for Leigh,
as strong and faithful as Ann before her,
Ann, who had been her older sister in faith in this very church.

Three women whose lives inspired me --

One, a poet,
One, a pilot,
One, my friend in Christ.

All of them people who lived out Jeremiah's poem – their roots running deep into the waters of grace.

And so, now, to us.
What is Jeremiah's word to us this morning?

Each of us is here today because at some essential, soul-deep level, we need to be fed.
Which is to say, each one of us here today because we need that stream of living water,
we need the waters of grace.
We are here this morning because we need a place where we can be rooted in something lasting and eternal and hope-filled.

We even use that language --
a family that joined our church recently called me to tell it was time, they were ready,
and the words they used were those:
we have found that place where we can sink our roots.
We are here, all of us, to do just that --
to sink our roots into streams of living water.

Because, oh do we need something true in which to be rooted.
We live in a time when, every day, there is something that shakes us, unbalances us – and so we need, more than anything, to feel grounded.

We live in a time when stoking fear has become just another rhetorical device – and so we need, more than anything, that which will give us hope.

We yearn to be rooted in what is good, and holy, and grace-filled.
Our souls thirst for God, our spirits hunger.
We long to be connected to a source of Love -
to the source of Love.

How then do we do that?

How do we live lives that run deep into the waters of grace,
lives that are strong because we are strengthened by Love.

How do we live those lives of faith?

It goes back, I think, to where this sermon started,
to what I read to you from Mary Oliver.

It goes back to **paying attention**.

*I don't know what a prayer is, said Mary Oliver,
I **do** know how to pay attention.*

To live a life rooted in the grace of God,
we begin simply by paying attention to all the ways in which God's grace is
already present in our lives, in ways large and small.

As part of our preparation for the Appalachia service trip this summer,
every teen who'll be traveling there with me
has to come in and talk to me about the trip --
for newbies, it's their time to ask questions --
but for the many who are returning to the trip for the second, third, fourth
time,

it's their chance to share with me what they've experienced on the trip.

And they speak, we always speak, of 'God moments',

of those moments of grace when they knew God's presence --

whether it was a child who couldn't stop hugging them at the end of the
week,

or the rush of joy they felt when they realized they were doing God's work.

To pay attention to the presence of grace

is to sink our roots into its waters.

To live a life sustained by God's grace,

we also have to pay attention to the ways in which we need that grace.

Jesus taught his followers about the need to be open to God's love

by telling them a parable about a seed on a rocky ground that never took
root.

We have to be **open** to God's grace,

and that means paying attention to our need for God.

We can't be that tree growing strong
unless we acknowledge our need for what makes us strong:
God's love, God's help, God's mercy, God's patience with us.

And when we do --
when we pay attention to the power of God's love and the presence of GO's
mercy,
when we sink our roots deep into Grace --
Then we grow strong.
We grow beautiful.
Then our lives, too, blossom forth in goodness.
Our lives, too, bear the fruit of compassion and integrity.

*Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.
They shall be like a tree planted by water.
Like a tree planted by water.
Amen.*