

Virtual Worship – Prayer, Readings & Homily

Sunday, March 29, 2020

Prayer

Breathe deep the breath of life.

Breathe deeply, connected to this community of love and justice, hope and grace –
know that here you are named and you are known as beloved.

Join me in this time of meditation and prayer, first by sharing silence together.

Spirit of Life, Source of Love,
God of a thousand names and beyond all naming,

Perhaps we've only begun to realize
that this has, and is, changing us.

That this unease, this uncertainty, this eerie lack of clarity,
is our own fear, vulnerability,
our own grief about the life we once had – days ago, weeks ago –
and how, for now, it is not what it was –
we are not who we were.

And also,
as all good wisdom and truth and teaching
that lasts any length of time, spanning centuries and culture,
spanning devastations and calamity and suffering and pain –
much of what the world feels like right now –
all good wisdom contains within it the world *also* –

because right there, right in the middle of this complex life and world,
there alongside the pain and uncertainty and grief,
is also strength –

something deep within us, not just as individuals, but as communities – some deep reserves we may not have known about 2 weeks ago, a month ago – reserves of compassion and caring and kindness and power and connection and community and love and hope – even if not a single one of these has a clear direction yet.

Perhaps, just now,
we are yet to know
how much love we are capable of.

We hold in our hearts this day all those who suffer in mind, body, or spirit.
I invite you to bring the names you are holding in your heart this day –
in joy or in sorrow, in celebration or in grief,
and silently or aloud now in this sacred hour,
to speak their names...

For all those names, and many others, may we all be held in love and grace.

These words of meditation come from the Rev. Jacqui Lewis minister of Middle Collegiate Church in New York City, written last week –

It's scary to watch everything getting canceled –
to see empty streets or watch Broadway go dark.
But, these are really signs of hope:
people making tough and painful decisions to reduce viral transmission.
Right now, love looks like an empty stadium.

Readings

"Today" by Mary Oliver

Today I'm flying low and I'm
not saying a word
I'm letting all the voodooos of ambition sleep.
The world goes on as it must,
the bees in the garden rumbling a little,
the fish leaping, the gnats getting eaten.
And so forth.
But I'm taking the day off.
Quiet as a feather.
I hardly move though really I'm traveling
a terrific distance.
Stillness. One of the doors
into the temple.

"Imagine" by Lynn Ungar

Imagine with me for a moment –
don't worry, I'm not saying it's real.
Imagine, if you can, that there has been
not a calamity, but a great awakening.
Pretend, just for a moment,
that we all so loved our threatened earth
that we stopped going on cruises,
limited international flights,
worked on cherishing the places
where we already are.
In this pretty fantasy, everyone who possibly can
stops commuting. Spends extra time
with their kids or pets or garden.
We have the revelation that everyone
needs health care, sick leave, steady work.
It occurs to us that health care workers
are heroes. Also teachers.
Not to mention the artists of all kinds
who teach us resilience and joy.

Imagine, if you will,
that we turned to our neighbors
in mutual aid, trading eggs for milk,
checking in on those who are elderly
or alone. Imagine that each of us
felt suddenly called to wonder
In this moment, what does the world need from me?
What are my gifts?
Yes, I know it's just a fantasy.
The world could never change
so radically overnight.
But imagine.

Homily – The Journey of Stillness

I have an old lamp –
stained glass, old cord, amber glow –

it has small cracks in a few places, but holding together.

It came to me through family –
through a great aunt.

It sits on an old table from my grandparents' house that's now in our home –
one of those push tables with big wheels on one side
and little fold out leaves on either side.

The table sits beneath pictures of both my and my wife's grandparents –
all but one of whom have passed on.

There's something about that lamp,
and the pictures of those elders, those ancestors,
illuminated by the soft glow of that lamp,
it has begun to feel powerful in a new and different way these last several nights.

Something about how that lamp itself, and those lives,
weathered so much over many years –
a great depression and world wars, personal struggles and triumphs of survival -

years of change and misfortune, of love and family, of resilience and uncertainty –
both those lives, and that lamp,
have found a way to come through,
a little cracked, a little frayed,
having been present for who knows
what conversations and stories, what struggles and pain, what joys and hopes –
and it shows up, like a little altar in the living room,
lighting up these dark nights.

Part of what I love about it –
is it holds so much – story, meaning, power –
by just sitting there – all a lamp does is sit and shine.

*I hardly move, writes Mary Oliver,
though really I'm traveling
a terrific distance.*

It's hard to stay still, for many of us.

When what used to be the normal world
would fly past us,
and sometimes we'd feel as if we couldn't keep up,
and all we'd want is some down time, some quiet time, some sabbath –

but this isn't what we were hoping for, I think.

Though some moments might be good,
though some parts of this might be a gift,

still, this isn't how we imagined some great gift of ease and sabbath.

How far have you travelled these days?

And I'm not asking about your essential or non-essential whereabouts,
because, in our faith, of course we're all essential to the beauty of the world –
but how far has your soul travelled in this short time,
while just sitting there?

Keeping our distance while trying to stay connected?

I have to say, I kind of love the joke I read going around recently –
CDC says to leave 6 feet of distance between each other –
and Minnesota Scandinavians respond - *that seems a little close*.

It's like Midwesterners have been training for social distancing our whole lives –
we go this – we were made for this.

There's an old Buddhist idiom that says,
Don't just do something – sit there.

What a wild and unexpected change –
that, as Rev. Jacqui Lewis wrote a little over a week ago,
right now, love looks like an empty stadium.

It's hard in a culture that has made an idol out of productivity,
in a world that has made systems that depend on consumerism,
in a society that equates idleness with unimportance –

it's hard for a culture, so steeped and rooted in rugged individualism
to go where I want, when I want, how I want -
and systems of capitalism that mock safety nets as handouts

and then, when something like this happens –
guess what – we're not set up for it very well.

People struggle to pay bills, care for their families, retain work –
small businesses struggle to imagine a way forward
in a situation that hasn't had to be imagined for over 100 years,
at least not in this way.

And perhaps we're realizing, in a way that we been forced to realize before,
that the way things are set up
have actually been failing us, as a society – for a long time.
That now, we deem as “essential” –

some of the lowest paying jobs in our country –
childcare workers, sanitation workers, grocery workers –
and we realize, that while we are all essential –
there's something broken here.

That's why I've been remembering Rev. Dr. King's words in Memphis in 1968,
*So often we overlook the worth and significance of those who are not in
professional jobs, or those who are not in the so-called big jobs. But let me say to
you tonight, that whenever you are engaged in work that serves humanity, and is
for the building of humanity, it has dignity, and it has worth. One day our society
must come to see this. One day our society will come to respect the sanitation
worker if it is to survive. For the person who picks up our garbage, in the final
analysis, is as significant as the physician.*

My goodness –

we sure are realizing the worth of things in a new way –
of the sanitation worker and the physician and the nurse and the teacher –

of these essential community heroes –
and those on the front lines in healthcare
literally, as they have always been, saving our lives.

Perhaps, we're imagining now, as Lynn Ungar writes,
that everyone needs health care, sick leave, steady work.

*It occurs to us that health care workers are heroes. Also teachers.
Not to mention the artists of all kinds who teach us resilience and joy.*

*Imagine, if you will,
that we turned to our neighbors
in mutual aid, trading eggs for milk,
checking in on those who are elderly
or alone.*

*Imagine that each of us
felt suddenly called to wonder
In this moment, what does the world need from me?
What are my gifts?*

That's what love looks like right now –
it's still, quiet, staying-homeness
while working so hard to care for each other.

Love looks like staying home,
and it looks like cheers from balconies in France and Atlanta,
as the healthcare workers change shifts
greeted by socially distant cheers across the public squares,
in gratitude.

Love looks like an empty stadium –
and distilleries making hand sanitizer,
and restaurants and schools giving out free meals,

it looks like companies continuing to pay their people, if they can,
and adapting to needs that change daily -

Love looks like industries shutting down
because people are more important than profit,
it looks like news articles and music and yoga classes and art and entertainment of
all kind being offered for free in ways they were never free before –

and socialist style relief grants and loans and debt forgiveness,

Love looks like
the soul travelling so far, into a new world,
where we turn to our neighbors
and have the courage to ask for help, or the courage to offer help,
and face the uncertainty
with as much humor and grace and love and compassion as we can.

Love
looks like planting the seeds now –
unsure of what sort of world they will grow up and in to –

but still believing in them enough
that the future, too,
whatever and whenever that will be,
will still need all the beauty we can offer.

Love is an empty church, an empty stadium, an empty calendar,
so that we have space
to fill it all up, overflowing, past the brim,
with love and light enough
to carry us on.

It's a mighty long ways...