

The Poetry of Lent:

Part 2: The Ancient Rhythm of Holding On and Letting Go

Second Sunday in Lent

Mark 8:31-38 Roman 4:13-25
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I want to begin with a short recap of the theme introduced last Sunday as our path through Lent this year. We will be following an inspirational devotional booklet entitled, **Mary Oliver and the Poetry of Lent: A Lenten Devotional**. For each of the five Sundays in the season of Lent there are readings – both an excerpt from the assigned lectionary scripture passage and an excerpt from one of her poems. A brief meditation and selected practices accompany these readings throughout each week.

The First Sunday of Lent rightly focused on the theme of repentance, which was the message of Jesus' first public pronouncement after his baptism and 40 days being tempted in the wilderness. **To repent simply means to turn around and have a change of heart, a change of mind, a change of life.** An image used in one of Mary Oliver's poems, Wild Geese, reminds us the Holy Spirit can be like a wild goose, flying untamed all around us, sometimes nipping at our heels calling us to a change of life. This image originally comes from ancient Celtic spirituality. We were also encouraged to connect with God by taking a wilderness walk at some point during last week, which I realize was a bit hampered by the cold and rainy weather. But there's always this week. Finally, we lit a candle, as we will at the close of each sermon during Lent. It was the Candle of Repentance, asking God to help us to change what needs to be changed.

That leads us today, the Second Sunday in Lent. Using the assigned lectionary Gospel reading, Mark 8:27-38, the devotional booklet focuses in on verse 36, **"For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?" This is going to make repentance seem easy.** To get into this a bit, let's look at an excerpt from Mary Oliver's poem, "In Blackwater Woods." It's printed on the cover of today's worship bulletin, and I'd like for us to read it together in unison.

*To live in this world
you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes
to let it go,
to let it go.*

The Meditation portion of the devotional booklet reflects: "This passage in Mark is full of mysteries, and at its core is how salvation somehow involves both losing one's life and saving it. Jesus warns that there are ways to "gain the whole world" and yet still lose your life; and at the same time he promises that God works through loss in order to save. With Oliver, we can see these mysteries unfold in the natural world – and in our own lives – through the ancient rhythms of giving and receiving, losing and saving, holding on and letting go."

In its own way, this poem and this meditation remind us **life and faith are always an unpredictable journey, not a destination**. This was true of the life of Abraham and Sarah, as we heard expressed by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans.

In the Gospel of Mark, he focused in particular on Jesus' and the disciples' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, and the final week of Jesus' life. In the process of that journey the portrayal of Jesus' ministry shifts. No longer will his messiahship be demonstrated through a ministry of healings and miracles. The way open before Jesus is now one of suffering and rejection and death. Jesus' journey with the disciples is one that takes them away from the safety and growing acceptance of Galilee and leads them onto what one biblical commentator calls, "the cross-strewn testing grounds of their faith."

After confessing Jesus as the Christ, the promised Messiah, Peter rebukes Jesus for saying the he must undergo great suffering, rejections, and death, only to rise again after three days. **Peter, in turn, is rebuked by Jesus for not being able to discern the difference between human things and divine things. We often have the same problem.** Then comes the bad news. Jesus then says that as disciples they are on a similar journey.

The stakes have just dramatically risen. There is suddenly more to being a disciple of Jesus than watching him heal and hearing him teach. Being a follower of Jesus, we learn, means taking responsibility for going on our own journey of faith with God. We also learn **discipleship involves giving up an element of our own lives through sacrificial love. A theology of the cross declares that having faith is not the same as being certain, living in hope is not the same as possessing optimism, and most importantly, love is not painless.**

The disciples surely must have envisioned their way to Jerusalem as a triumphal journey, not as a death march. How much of Christianity today still misunderstands this aspect of discipleship, glossing over their particular understanding of Christianity with a sense of triumphalism and victory. Understanding this as a denomination is probably why there isn't a Triumph Presbyterian Church, let alone a Victory Presbyterian.

Instead, **Jesus lays out just three requirements, but they are frightening: to deny oneself, to take up one's cross, and to follow Jesus. I would suggest that these still apply to those of us who follow Jesus today.** A quick word about what it means to deny oneself, however. A popular phrase used in Alcoholics Anonymous goes like this: "It doesn't mean think less of yourself, just think of yourself less." We can never insulate ourselves completely. Life is a continuous and sometimes hazardous journey. So, let us again recall the wisdom offered by Mary Oliver "to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go."

The devotional booklet offers some practices that may help in this regard. It suggests: **Experiment with a “letting go” fast this week**, creating little sanctuaries of Sabbath time. Try fasting from technology for an hour, a day, or the whole week; or create a mealtime “Sabbath box” for cell phones or other devices, so you can better taste and see how God is good!

Here's another: **Make a list of what you need to embrace and to release** in order to live more fully. Make the list itself beautiful (handwrite it on special paper; illuminate initial letters like an ancient manuscript; whatever works!) and put it up somewhere you'll see it every day. Explore this question in a journal, or discuss it with family or friends over a meal. This is similar to what I shared on the first Sunday of this year about carrying around (metaphorically) a backpack, and the need to see what things you need to keep or put into your backpack, and what you might need to take out.

Before closing with the lighting of the candle for this week, I want to share another poem, posted just this week by Steve Garnaas-Holmes on his website, www.unfoldinglight.net. It's entitled, “Deny Yourself,” reflecting on Mark 8:34, Deny yourself and take up your cross and follow me.

*Abandon the illusion you're a self-contained individual.
Be a part of this wounded world,
and find yourself with Christ.*

*Set aside your own desires,
give yourself fully for others;
be the hands and heart of Jesus.*

*Renounce self-protection,
accept your brokenness,
and reach out for love.*

*Let go of your own plans.
Join in the healing of the world.
You will not be alone.*

*Follow your soul, not your ego.
Follow it right into people's suffering.
Follow it right into the heart of God.*

*Pour yourself out;
let the world pour in;
then you are one with the Beloved.*

Opportunities are daily before us, times when we may give our lives sacrificially to the acts of love, compassion, justice, and peace, even in the face of the same forces of sin and death that confronted Jesus. So, as the devotional suggests, this week begin each day by lighting a **candle of salvation**, praying, **“God of grace, help me love what is mortal. Help me hold on to what needs to be embraced, let go of what needs to be let go – and have the wisdom to know the difference.” [Light candle.]** And now, if you so choose, repeat this prayer after me:

God of grace,
help me love what is mortal.
Help me hold on to
what needs to be embraced,
let go of
what needs to be let go
– and have the wisdom to know the difference.

Amen.