

Sermon: Holy Troublemaker and Unconventional Saints – Mary Oliver
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SCRIPTURE

Isaiah 55.1-11

55 Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. ²Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. ³Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. ⁴See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. ⁵See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you.

⁶Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; ⁷let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. ⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. ⁹For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. ¹⁰For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Luke 11: 1-13

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"

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I have often been intrigued by Bible passages about Jesus and prayer. In today's reading from Luke's gospel, Jesus is asked how to pray. He gives his friends a recipe for prayer – what we call the Lord's Prayer. It reminds us of that despite God's holy name, we can our call God Father, because God is our loving parent. The prayer also includes

Asking God to sustain us, by turning to God daily for our bread-for sustenance, daily.

Acknowledging God's desire for us to build the kingdom that God desires for all people right here on earth.

Recognizing the importance of forgiveness – including forgiving others as we want to be forgiven.

While this recipe is a wonderful guide for Jesus' followers, I still wonder if Jesus perhaps also prayed with different words when he went off alone to pray.

We know that Jesus would regularly go off alone to pray. For example, in Matthew's gospel, after Jesus fed thousands and they all had their fill, Jesus sent the people away and sent his disciples off in a boat. Then he went up the mountain by himself to pray (Matthew 14: 21-23). In Luke's gospel, we hear, "Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God." (Luke 6: 12) Jesus may have rested and then fortified himself spiritually while there in prayer because when he came down he called his twelve disciples, healed people from across the ancient world, and gave his sermon that we know as the Beatitudes. Again and again Jesus withdrew to the mountain– a high spot in nature where he could be closer to the heavens and he could look upon the world.

Have you ever wondered what or how Jesus prayed on the mountain? Did he look down upon where he had been teaching and or feeding the crowds and re-imagine the scene? Did he recall faces of people who might have been looking for words of wisdom or for healing or who were simply curious? Did he recall the surprise in their faces when food was multiplied and passed around so that all were fed? Did their words and voices echo in his head and his heart?

Did Jesus speak to his Father and ask God to bless those people? Did he hope that his teaching touched hearts and minds to bring about his Father's kingdom for all people? Did he ask for patience and strength for himself?

Or did Jesus simply rest in God?

Did he take time to step away to watch the sun setting and the moon rising or the clouds rolling in to form a storm? Did he find comfort in listening to the birds chirping in the trees? Did he savor the scent of flowers in bloom? Did he give thanks for the coolness of the mountain air as he closed his eyes to sleep?

Obviously, I cannot tell you what Jesus thought or prayed.

But I do know that stepping away from the hustle and bustle of our world to a mountain or to a stream or to the beach, or even a church or a special place in our homes, can be sacred. When we take the time to be present to God – in nature or the solitude of wherever we find sanctuary -it can be a sacred experience.

It can involve sitting quietly, being present to the wonder of creation that surrounds us. It may even involve taking that experience and sharing it with others. Which brings me to Mary Oliver, this week's person from the book "Holy Troublemakers and Unconventional Saints." *

Mary Oliver was a poet who grew up in Ohio but lived most of her life on Cape Cod. As a child, her home life was difficult; abused by her father and neglected by her mother. So she would skip school and go off into nature with books of poetry, later saying that going into the woods saved her life. She once said, "The old dead poets were my friends. I saved my own life by finding a place for myself that wasn't in that house." She started writing her own poems when she was about 10 years old, bringing a notebook and a pencil with her on her walks to scribble down notes. She often saved her notes for a later time, then wrote a poem from them. In an interview with Krista Tippett, she said that her early poems were awful, but she kept at it. She realized that writing poetry was what she was meant to do in life.

Mary Oliver left home at age 17, moving to Cape Cod. Her life was hard as she had very little money. She relied on food she found in nature – edible plants, mushrooms, fish and clams – until her poetry began to sell. But the joy she found in her writing sustained her. She published her first book of poems in her early 20s. And in her late 20s she met the love of her life, Molly Cook, a photographer. Together they lived in Provincetown, MA for over 40 years – until Molly died.

Mary Oliver found inspiration for her poems in nature. While she attended an Episcopal Church in Provincetown, being attentive and present to nature was integral to her spirituality. She was diligent about awakening at 5 am to start writing. She would write down thoughts while standing, walking or sitting and then or possibly even years later, something would come to her, an inspiration that she did not know where it came from. She would then finish that poem.

Other times she threw away writings that she did not think were good enough. She describes poetry as old, sacred, and communal; writings that people can remember and repeat to themselves. She compared it to a prayer.

And her poetry conveyed her spirituality, including thoughts about God, death, prayer and the meaning of life – much of which she found inherent in the life cycles of nature. She said, “We all wonder about God. Who is God? What’s going to happen when we die?...It’s not nothing... It’s an endless, unanswerable quest, but I find it fascinating.”

She was a beloved poet and an unconventional spiritual guide for many who have come to engage with her poetry. She wrote in simple language. She identified the value of attention and considered it the beginning of devotion. But she believed that, when she wrote, her attention must be accompanied by empathy to be more than a field guide. And she invited others into the experience that she shared in her poems by using “I” in them saying, “I wanted the ‘I’ to be the possible reader.”

In one of her most famous poems, “The Summer Day,” you can see her paying attention, her empathy, her spirituality, and her desire to engage to her readers. She shares her questions about who created the world and its creatures, describes the experience of a grasshopper eating from her hand, poses questions about prayer, and asks how we are to live our one and only life. It is beautiful and

Jesus went to the mountain to pray. He went there often, as an integral part of his life and ministry. Perhaps he had long conversations with his Father. Perhaps he sat there in silence. Perhaps he turned to nature. He certainly shared his knowledge of nature – of fig trees, mustard trees, birds, lilies, and sowing seeds – with us. He even knew about the wind and the waves so he could calm storms. Perhaps his time in nature allowed him to relax and be refreshed. Jesus, present at Creation, knew that nature is very good.

Mary Oliver understood that life has its struggles but her poetry empowered her to share her thoughts on nature, on life, on God, and on prayer; and to love life. As she has aged, she has come to understand more about her struggles as a child and as an adult with the loss of her beloved Molly, and even battling her own

cancer. She believed that with the passage of time and experience, she “entered more fully into the human world and embraced it.” And her time in nature, her paying attention and her empathy that enabled her to grow as a person. Nature fed her spiritually and she shared what she received with others through her writings.

So, perhaps in this season when we can see the beauty of nature in full bloom and actually taste its goodness, we might ask ourselves, how and where do I go to connect with God? While Jesus gave us one recipe for prayer, it is not the only one.

Perhaps the words from Mary Oliver’s poem entitled “Praying” offer another way to pray as it encourages us to consider simple and unassuming things of nature like weeds or small stones, to pay attention, and to piece together simple words that enable us to open ourselves to gratitude and listen to God. Obviously my summary is not poetic or beautiful. But her poem is. And in its few words it reminds us that prayer is about simplicity and openness to God. It’s not a recipe but rather an invitation to come with our words to One who wants to speak to us. And I say “Amen”

References

Akers, Daneen. Holy Troublemakers & Unconventional Saints. “Mary Oliver,” (U.S.: Watchfire Media, 2019.) pp 148-153.

Mary Oliver – Listening to the World – found on YouTube - The On Being Project, interview from 09/23/2019.

I invite you to read Mary Oliver’s poem, “The Summer Day,” in her book, House of Light, or her book, New and Selected Poems, Volume One or on line; and read the poem, “Praying” in her book, **Thirst**, or on line.

