



“Consider the Lilies”

Scripture – Matthew 6:25-34

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, May 12, 2024

A colleague tells a story about Father Robert who enjoys a leisurely stroll through the woods with his little dog, Pugsley. Sister AJ rarely walked with them. She was not fond of the dog, and she could accomplish much more when Father Robert was not underfoot.

“But as the aging priest grew less steady on his feet, the sister felt obliged to accompany him. He was thrilled to have her company, though he tried her patience by stopping every few yards to point out a particular flower, a certain rock, or the tracks of a raccoon. He often paused in these moments to pray...blissfully unaware of Sister AJ dodging poison ivy to chase after Pugsley, who had a habit of wandering off-trail.”

“One day when they were out walking Father Robert paused to consider the lilies. His eyes were closed when Sister AJ, standing a few feet behind him, said in a low voice, ‘Father, pick up Pugsley and walk slowly over here.’”

“Oblivious to mere earthly matters, Father Robert held his hands toward the sky and said, ‘Sister, sister. Choose the better way.’ To which Sister AJ said again, this time through gritted teeth, ‘Father. Pick. Up. Pugsley. And come. Over. Here. *Now.*’”

“It’s said that we see what we focus on. It’s equally true that what we focus on determines what we do not see. And that day, neither the priest nor Pugsley saw the bear 15 feet away. The bear was weighing its odds of scoring dachshund for dinner without getting a snout full of Sister AJ’s bear spray.”

“Later, when Sister AJ told her friends the story, they all laughed at Father Robert’s characteristic absentmindedness and congratulated the Sister for saving their lives. But she replied, ‘Are you kidding? If that man and his fool dog hadn’t stopped right then and there, I would have led us straight up to that bear and it would have picked off all three of us.’”¹

What we see and what we do not see shapes our experience of life. Sitting next to Walden Pond, Henry David Thoreau wrote, “Only that day dawns to which we are awake.”

How awake are you? On a scale of one to ten, with ten being fully awake and one being oblivious to the present moment, where do you fall most of the time?

I confess that I am generally on the low end of the scale. Not only am I obsessing over my long to-do list, meetings to attend, pastoral concerns, and scouring resources for sermon ideas, I am also thinking about what I will do *next* rather than being present in the moment. I am much more prone to charging ahead, than pausing and drinking in the current situation. I could certainly use a good deal more Father Robert in me. Not the absent-mindedness, but the attentiveness.

In today's passage, Jesus issues a warning: *worries* can distract us from experiencing majestic moments. He says, "Look closely at the birds. Ponder the lilies. Do not worry about what you will eat or drink or wear."

As he often does, Jesus overstates the case to make his point. Of course, we have to give some thought to the necessities of life, but he warns us not to become so engulfed in these matters that they completely dominate our thoughts. He is saying that if the mundane and the routine become our chief focus, we will miss the moments that evoke awe and wonder – those extraordinary instances where the light shines bright and joy wells up inside us.

When Jesus says, "Do not worry," he is not challenging us to do the impossible. Neither is he saying, "Do not plan for the future." He exaggerates his case to seize our attention. He is saying, "Do not become so anxious about the future that you are blind to the present." Worries rob us of rich experiences by distracting us from beautiful moments. If your eyes are discerning and your heart is permeable, moments of awe and wonder will find you.

A sense of awe springs from experiences that transcend our ordinary encounters. Awe is aroused when witnessing a solar eclipse or the aurora borealis, cuddling a newborn, riveting music that stirs our soul, a spiritual insight that sparks a new mindset, or a tender connection with another person. A sense of awe wells within us when we are drawn out of the familiar and we are reminded of the mystery and marvels of existence.

How can we become more attentive to the present so that we do not overlook the rich and beautiful moments that present themselves?

I suspect each of us would benefit by praying Reinhold Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer each morning when we rise. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change." Or, as Jesus put it: Which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life?"

Again, Niebuhr: "Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time." Or, as Jesus put it: Spend time watching birds and pondering lilies.

Taking these steps helps to clear your mind of whatever baggage you are currently carrying – anxiety, anger, despair, thoughts of what you will be doing next.

A colleague recommends the 5-4-3-2-1 method which prompts us to use all five senses to live in the NOW. He says that several times each day we should pause and savor five things we can see, four sounds we can hear, three things we can touch, two aromas we can smell, and one thing we can taste.² The key instruction here is to **savor**. Do not simply glance at five things you can see, but relish them. Ponder, inspect, question, and appreciate each one as if you are discovering it for the first time.

A colleague made me aware of a book by Harvard professor Elaine Scarry who wrote about beauty. Scarry says that “Beauty prompts a copy of itself.” That is, when you are touched by beauty whether in the natural world or by a beautiful act, it urges you to replicate it. It calls for you to think beautiful thoughts and perform beautiful actions. Beauty calls forth beauty.

Her second point is that beauty awakens us to what is not beautiful – “specifically to what has been injured, disfigured, cheapened, or debased...In this way, beauty is capable of motivating us toward the work of repair – because once you have been touched deeply by beauty, in a lily or (an act of compassion, it encourages you to engage) in the kind of work that clears the way for more beauty in the world.”³

Scarry’s third point is that beauty has the power to remove us from the center of the universe like almost nothing else can...(It changes your perspective) so that your vision is expanded from that moment forward. You see more. You feel more. You *are* more.”⁴

You may have seen the video of a street musician named Tyler the Guitar Man. Tyler has a long, scraggly beard, wears a floppy leather hat, and tattoos cover his arms. His singing voice is deep and weathered with a few rough edges. The Guitar Man sits atop a small plywood box, and as he plays, he keeps the beat with his cowboy boots stomping in time to the music.

It is a common scene: a street musician playing a few songs with his guitar case open hoping folks passing by will drop a few dollars in it. No one is standing close to the musician except for a mom and her son who have stopped to listen. The boy’s name is Jacob. He’s eight years old, has autism, is blind, and is clearly enjoying Tyler the Guitar Man. Tyler is playing the old Lead Belly song: “Midnight Special.”

*Let the midnight special shine her light on me
Let the midnight special shine her ever loving light on me*

Mom has one hand on Jacob’s shoulder because with each back-and-forth he is inching closer to Tyler the guitar man. She’s not sure if this is okay. Maybe not, but Tyler doesn’t seem to mind, so she lets her son move a little closer and a little closer.

Finally, Jacob’s right foot touches the plywood box. He’s rocking back-and-forth, and the guitar man is stomping his boots and continuing to sing:

*Let the midnight special shine her light on me.
Let the midnight special shine her loving light on me.*

Jacob holds up his little hands, feeling the music in the air. And finally, he does what he’s been wanting to do. He reaches out and touches the guitar. Mom doesn’t want to make a scene, but she doesn’t really want to stop him either. She quickly asks Tyler, “Can he touch your guitar?”

Tyler keeps playing, keeps stomping his boots, and just nods his head in time: Yes. Yes.

It is a beautiful sight – three people: a cautious mother, a grizzled street musician, and a boy who is blind rocking back-and-forth with his palms on the guitar.⁵

And if you peer closely, you can witness a moment in which beauty pierces the mundane and joy permeates the moment and the realm of God is all around.

Yesterday may hold fond or frightening memories, but it is past. The future is unknown and may not unfold as we imagine. What we have is the present moment. May we be awake to its beauty and blessing.

NOTES

1. Erica MacCreaigh, “In the Lectionary,” *The Christian Century*, September 2023.
2. Don McMinn, “Live in the Now,” *Think with Me*, May 9, 2023.
3. Barbara Brown Taylor, *Always a Guest*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2020), p. 13.
4. *Ibid.*, p.14.
5. Ben Johnston-Krase, “An Out of Hand Church,” *Journal for Preachers: Pentecost 2024*, p. 42-43. YouTube video entitled “Blind and Autistic 8 Year Old Boy Meets a Street Musician.”

Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones

Gracious God, who cares for us like a wise and loving parent, we pause to celebrate and honor those who have taken up the mantle of motherhood – both those who nurtured us during their lives but are now in your heavenly kingdom, and those who carry out this vital calling today.

We give thanks for mothers whose love knows no bounds – for selfless sacrifices, postponed desires, and surrendered dreams for the sake of their children.

We are grateful for the discipline they provided even when we did not understand or appreciate its importance.

We are thankful for the healing power in their hugs, the reassuring protection upon which we depended, their patience when we were exasperating, their guidance when we were adrift, their forgiveness when we were off the mark, and their unwavering support that assured us we were loved and appreciated and worthy.

We pray that each mother may know the importance of her work in helping to shape the future of her child. Even when results are not apparent and even when children are grown adults, mothers can provide a model of a compassionate, generous, fair, humble, self-disciplined, and honest human being.

Mighty God, we pray for mothers who struggle with the demands of the day, for those who cannot abide another sleepless night, for those who feel they are cracking under the stress, for those who question their competence, and for those who feel they are not supported in their efforts. Motherhood can be such an awesome responsibility and an overwhelming and exhausting endeavor that many may believe

they are not up to the challenge. God, buoy them with confidence and resolve, and infuse them with love and wisdom so that they may perform their indispensable job.

Loving God, we rejoice with those who have given birth to, or adopted a child this year, and we weep with those who have lost a child.

We pray for those who have been cut off from their children that they may have an empathetic friend who will carry part of the burden.

We pray for those who were abused by their mother, that they may discover loving relationships that help to erase the scars inflicted by a disturbed soul.

We pray for those who must be both mother and father to their children.

Eternal God, we give thanks:

for stepmothers, who successfully navigate the challenging terrain they must traverse;

for aunts and grandmothers who generously bestow love and guidance;

for surrogate mothers who provide a blessing for couples;

and for foster mothers who provide love and support for children who need a capable and caring parent.

God of love, we rejoice with all mothers who enjoy beautiful bonds with their children; may they know in their souls that they are successfully fulfilling one of the most important jobs in the world by nurturing, guiding, disciplining, and encouraging the next generation.

And may those of us who were raised by wonderful mothers express our gratitude for a blessing that continues to grace us throughout our lives.

The mother of Jesus loved him from his birth to his death and was the most powerful influence on his life. In honor of her, throughout the centuries countless girls have been named Mary, Maria, Marie, Maryam, Mary Beth, Mary Lou, and more.

The love and guidance of his mother may have inspired the prayer Jesus taught his disciples and which we pray together now, saying, **Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**