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Psalm 19, Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6,8-19, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, Luke 4:14-21

Did you ever feel that the Spirit of God was upon you? Today's gospel shows us how to be Christian in our world. The Spirit of the Lord is not just on the clean shaven, and those who can afford things. The Spirit of God is also on the needy, the hungry, the thirsty- those too often overlooked and left out. Let us not be too quick to judge, for Christ is sitting next to us on the bus, at church, in our homes or at the door of our local coffee shop.

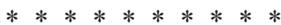
It is always good to read the readings prior to our Sunday gathering. Let the readings speak to you.



We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give. -Sir Winston Churchill



The person who gives little with a smile gives more than the person who gives much with a frown. -Jewish proverb



God has given us two hands— one to receive with and the other to give with. We are not cisterns made for hoarding; we are channels made for sharing. -Billy Graham



BE WHO YOU NEEDED WHEN YOU WERE YOUNGER. -Church Sign



Last week, Mary Oliver died, the patron saint of paying compassionate attention. Her poetry is the art of bearing witness to our world. She invited us to put our lips to the sacred present in the ordinary. She

reminded us that life is not about playing the right notes. It is about recovering the questions that allow us to hear the music. And about the inevitable, Oliver wrote,

“When it's over, I want to say all my life I was a bride married to amazement.”

And I say, count me in. We are wired to be replenished and nourished. And Mary's poetry blesses me, walking with me through my internal struggles, filling my heart with uncontainable gratitude.

“There is a paradoxical urgency at this time in history to slowing down,” poet Kim Rosen writes, “focusing on what matters, looking into each other's eyes and speaking the truth.” Okay. I'll start. Fear, shame and exhaustion no longer serve me. They diminish me. And when I give them credence, amazement and gratitude languish. I'm not sure why I bought their narrative for so long. If it was security I needed, they fabricated entirely the opposite.

I'm not talking about a program to add to our life. This is an invitation to reclaim a self, that has been lost or buried in the debris of frenzied upside-down world.

This is why I love Mary Oliver's poetry...

“...and there was a new voice which you slowly recognized as your own, that kept you company as you strode deeper and deeper into the world, determined to do the only thing you could do -- determined to save the only life you could save.”

Mary Oliver (The Journey)

To reclaim the self and hydrate our soul, requires a paradigm shift. After all, we're not wired to live this way, self-compassionate. Thomas Merton, well-known Trappist monk and activist, tells about a revelation he had while sitting alone in the woods with his Coleman lantern. He is confronted with the fact that Coleman has constructed its lantern with a pragmatic intention over and above the simple provision of light. The

packing box declares that the lantern, "stretches days to give more hours of fun." Merton asks rhetorically, "Can't I just be in the woods without any special reason?"

He goes on to say that, in fact, "We are not having fun, we are not 'having' anything, we are not 'stretching our days,' and if we had fun, it would not be measured by hours. Though as a matter of fact that is what fun seems to be: a state of diffuse excitation that can be measured by the clock and 'stretched by an appliance.'" This story makes me smile real big. And perhaps Merton is on to something here. The possibilities are limitless: Fun-inducing appliances, coupled with an industry which helps us justify our time. Our pockets filled with gadgets designed to do just that. Don't tell Apple or Microsoft or Google that you heard it here first.

What is it about our insidious need to assign value to every act or expenditure of time? As in, "Did you get anything done this morning?" Or, upon returning from any vacation, or even a sanctuary at a retreat center, we are quizzed, "How was it? What did you do?" Lord have mercy. And we lump anything not of value into that great compost bin contrived to amass our wasted time.

But it's deeper than all of that, isn't it? It seems that our perception of what is "real" (and of value) is distorted. Real becomes anything "of use." In other words, that which has market value, or is of pragmatic significance. The afternoon then, can no longer be "just" celebrated. It has to be "used judiciously." Which takes some mental gymnastics when these are our instructions for living a life. Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it. (Mary Oliver)

A father is concerned about his son's education at the new public school. They are a "back woods" family, far away from civilization and without any formal education. Still, the father wonders about this

new school and its curriculum. “What will they learn you?” he asks his son, “Will they learn you why the river makes that singing sound when the moon is right?”

My friend Lee Jaster found a love of gardening later in life. He told me, “One day I went to my garden to walk and pray. But I was so enamored with it all I couldn’t focus on prayer. The fragrance of the lilies... I felt horribly guilty, until it hit me that this infatuation was my prayer.”

In other words, will they learn you, in the words of Thomas Merton that “Life is this simple. We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through us all the time. This is not just a fable or a nice story. It is true. If we abandon ourselves to God, forget ourselves, we see it.”

I’ve been asked, too often, what I believe. My favorite variation is any inquiry about my doctrinal statement. This begins a volley of theological catch phrases, which become de facto passwords for many religious organizations. It’s the way we tell who’s in and who’s out.

Here’s the odd part; I’m not asked about what nourishes my soul. Or for stories about what amazes me, warms my blood, makes my heart soft, sends gooseflesh up my arms, makes me want to dance, makes me love life, or laugh and cry at the same time. I’ve been asked about what is appropriate, but never about what is important.

Here’s the deal: once you’ve tasted and married amazement, you get the sense that the medicine is itself blessedly fatal, so instead of fighting it with some stern and dour sounding work-ethic-inner-voice, we might just as well plop down on a garden bench and squander a few minutes (or even a day) **and give this sacrament of the present vaccine a whirl.**

There is a time, perhaps dusk on the back deck, cheered by the finches as they vie for seed and ambushed by a spiced pungency from indistinct winter blooms of

the evergreen shrub Sarcococca, conjuring memories of Grandmother’s kitchen and hugs that don’t quit—when, for reasons not yet fully realized, you start to take back what has been disowned. And maybe, just maybe, you start to slowly embrace what is there, rather than to pine away for tomorrow.

Monday was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr Day. A day to celebrate spilling the light, remembering his reassurance, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” And, “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” I learned a new word this week. Fika (fee-ka), Swedish, meaning a moment to slow down and enjoy the good things in life. And I read a lot of poetry that feeds my soul. RIP Mary Oliver.

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Almost finished reading A Terrible Country by Keith Gessen - it asks what you owe the place where you were born, and what it owes you.

*Polar Bear Plunge and Winter Festival in New Baltimore this weekend is always a fun time and this year after the plunge, not me, I will take in the benefit concert at the Congregational Church with the **MI Chamber Choral at 3:00.***

New Baltimore Polar Bear Plunge ...
voicenews.com

