

Sermon August 25, 2024

Song for Autumn - Mary Oliver

Don't you imagine the leaves dream now
how comfortable it will be to touch
the earth instead of the
nothingness of the air and the endless
freshets of wind? And don't you think
the trees, especially those with
mossy hollows, are beginning to look for

the birds that will come—six, a dozen—to sleep
inside their bodies? And don't you hear
the goldenrod whispering goodbye,
the everlasting being crowned with the first
tuffets of snow? The pond
stiffens and the white field over which
the fox runs so quickly brings out
its long blue shadows. The wind wags
its many tails. And in the evening
the piled firewood shifts a little
longing to be on its way.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?' He said to them, 'Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

"This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;

in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.”
You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.’

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, ‘Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.’ For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.’

Doing the Work of God

Three construction workers building a church. Why?

- Laying bricks
- \$20 an hour
- I am building a cathedral that will honor God!

All three of them can get the job done. In the end, there will be a beautiful building – maybe like this one – that will be filled with memories and moments of worship. Does it really matter what the workers bring with them to the workplace?

All three workers can achieve their goal... but think about the quality of their work... and think about the fulfillment of their own experience. And how that experience can inspire those who come after them.

Today we hear not of three workers, but of three groups who gather around Jesus to hear him teach: Pharisees, disciples and scribes. They all come bringing their own needs and gifts. They all come hoping to learn.

The Pharisees and Jesus’ disciples were all working to build God’s Kingdom. We think of the Pharisees of being the bad guys, but that’s not really fair. They were reformers and their views were not so far from Jesus’ own beliefs, including the promise of resurrection. In fact, Pharisaic beliefs became the foundation for Rabbinic Judaism.

But those Pharisaic reforms also held the risk of becoming so ritualistic that they lost meaning. There were so many laws and rules to follow... each one equally vital and important and sacred... that it was easy to lose sight of *why* those laws were created in the first place.

“Why aren’t your disciples washing their hands?” It’s not just a question of cleanliness... its an issue of godliness. They were breaking basic purity laws... now they were unclean inside as well as outside.

They are so horrified that it doesn’t occur to them that the disciples are there to honor God too. And that their ways are sacred too.

Ask Them!

I wonder who are the people who inspire you and teach you about faith. Parents and grandparents; Sunday School teachers and the elderly neighbor down the street. Maybe it has been those we see only from a distance or on our tv screens: Marting Luther King, William Barber... Neil Armstrong. Or maybe you turn to the sinners and saints who made the way for us to be here: Antoinette Brown, who was the first woman to be ordained almost 200 years ago... St. Francis or St. Teresa...

we are all lifted up by the lives of these ordinary and extraordinary people.

That ability to inspire... to catch people for Christ... is part of what we are called to do as disciples. In their own ways, each one has built cathedrals that honor God. Cathedrals of hope and love and discipleship.

Jesus gets frustrated today with the Pharisees today because they are so focused on whether or not the disciples are following purity laws, they miss out on opportunities to inspire God’s beloved children. To pull out their nets and see what they can catch for God.

James tells us today that it is not enough to hear the word... to sit in worship, to promise in prayer and song to be good. We must go and live out that Word in our lives. Everything we do, everything we say, everything we are

should be a reflection of the Word we hear. Our actions, inside and out, are the way we live out our covenant with God.

So what are we supposed to do? To use the sacred words we hear as a guide to our own behavior, not to judge others but to inspire them... to lift them up.

To remember the greatest commandment of all – the words that should guide us at all times... the words that help us understand all of the other laws, passed on generation to generation

“Love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself.”

The truth is, there is only one place to look if we want to find out how good we are, or how righteous we are. There is only one place. That place is God— God is absolute goodness, God is absolute justice, God is absolute love and mercy.

So why do we build the kingdom of God? Is it because we get \$20 a day, or a chance to lay bricks? No! Those are good things, but that’s not what brings us here.

We are here...we are out there... to build a cathedral to honor God and inspire those who will follow us.

Amen

A Celtic Blessing

The deep peace of the powerful wave be with you,
The deep peace of the air that moves be with you,
The deep peace of the water that flows be with you,
The deep peace of the silent land be with you,
The deep peace of the shining stars be with you,
May the deep peace of the Creator, Redeemer and the Spirit of Peace be with you always. Amen