

THE SUMMER OF OUR LIVES
Sunday, June 25, 2017
St. Paul's Cathedral, Kamloops BC
The Very Rev. Ken Gray

In preparation for this sermon, knowing that summer would be on our seasonal doorstep I searched online for appropriate poetry, I found two wildly contrasting pieces. First, Anne Lamott:

Summer, nearly does me in every year;
It's too hot, and the light is always unforgiving;
And the days go on way too long . . .

A more sympathetic offering comes from Mary Oliver, a piece titled *The Summer Day*:

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention,
how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

The last four lines capture my attention and imagination. What do *I plan to do* with my owl wild and precious life? In such words I consider anew the question of vocation. How can and will I use the time given me? And in concert with this enquiry, what will be required for the journey and what challenges will emerge?

I was not pleased to discover the verses assigned for today. In the verses from Matthew's Gospel there are interpretive and emotional landmines everywhere. At face value, the cost of following Jesus who we call *Lord*, is huge. Divisions will occur even in that most treasured place called family and home.

Matthew's missionary discourse seems to describe acute missionary discomfort; this is no recruitment script; it would discourage all but the feeble-minded or most aggressive personality. If the angels once sang that the coming of Christ would bring peace on earth, that yuletide social and spiritual experience has evaporated as we hear that a sword is the new symbol of hope.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

Certainly amidst many contradictory images we do find the promise of care even in troubling times. The hairs on our head are numbered and we are of greater value even than the sparrow.

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground unperceived by your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

Matthew introduces here for the first time the symbol of the cross, at a point where we have no idea of what the cross will involve for Jesus himself. We sense that discipleship is costly. To push back against the status quo imposed by empire (which can be political, social, economic, even philosophical) will cause resistance, disrepute, even open conflict. To those in Matthew’s church who had experience persecution, a life which keeps the cross in full view validates their negative experiences and encourages them to carry despite what happens around them. For others who have yet to step into the dangerous traffic of life, the cross, and sacrifice are puzzling and unappealing concepts. One commentator writes:

“Unless we in a sense take up our cross we cannot begin to comprehend the way of Jesus Christ, who took up the cross. The preparation of the apostles for Jesus’ death and resurrection was not a matter of thinking the right thoughts, grasping it on a cognitive level. By the ordering of his Gospel, Matthew seems to suggest that only mission in the way of the cross can prepare us for recognizing the Christ of the cross when he comes.”

No let’s remember that in reading Matthew’s Gospel we hear some of the most demanding challenges in the entire bible. As an author, Matthew was anything but “easy going.” He is not above using threats – about judgement, punishment and our reception in the heavenly realms. Here he clearly and sharply suggests there will be consequences in eternity which connect with how we live our life right now. Some reject such notions as either silly, or outside the nature of a loving God. Others

take stock – which is exactly what he wants us to do. Some days, I easily remind myself that God is Love and that is all one needs to know. Other days, I am concerned that I must live up to expectations, of myself, of others and of God. I vacillate. So I pay attention when I hear the ambiguous words about the cross and life together:

“Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

I hear these words as both challenge and liberation. These words are common to both Matthew and Luke, and may have existed within a separate document titled “Q” (source) at one time. Such language parallels that of the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, a collection of sayings which are designed to prod and provoke reaction and reflection leading to new insight and life-change. Some of us have spent time studying Thomas and find insight there. I will say however that these sayings are meant to disturb and do so through their inability to produce conclusions. If you read Thomas, and are not disturbed or challenged, you have missed the boat.

Speaking of boats, how can I bring this reflection back to port. I have two suggestions:

First, a quote from the great American novelist Marilynne Robinson: “Perhaps the real lack of faith in modern society comes down to a lack of reverence for the people around us.” Faith is lived in the details and delights of daily living. We can think anything about the future, but what we say and do in the present moment is the most important focus and forum for living our love, right here, right now.

Second, I return to the question I posed earlier from Mary Oliver’s poem: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

It's a great question, well considered in the lazy months of a hot Kamloops summer, which can ground us in the present world, leaving room for inspiration and encouragement, but also helping us prepare for challenge and even discouragement" all this in light of a hopeful future within the presence of God.

Happy summer everyone.