

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Proper 17 Year B

On my spiritual pilgrimage last week, on the midweek day of Wednesday, when our heart, soul, and body had seemingly each been broken open through a variety of challenging opportunities, which invited us beyond our comfort zone, we sat gathered in a circle, before our morning time of contemplative prayer, and Glenn, our leader read us this poem by Mary Oliver: *If I wanted a boat*.

It goes like this:

IF I WANTED A BOAT

I would want a boat,
that bounded hard on the waves,
that didn't know starboard from port
and wouldn't learn,
that welcomed dolphins
and headed straight for the whales,
that, when rocks were close, would slide in for a touch or two,
that wouldn't keep land in sight
and went fast,
that leaped into the spray.
What kind of life is it always
to plan and do, to promise and finish,
to wish for the near and the safe?
Yes, by the heavens, if I wanted a boat
I would want a boat that I couldn't steer.

This poem was perfectly chosen for the beginning of a day, full of a great expanse of time to be silent, to read and reflect, to engage in conversation with God around questions that we may not have yet known we needed to explore, together.

I pondered this poem a great deal, for actually Bill and I do have a boat, and I'm actually really glad Bill can steer our boat, so I can relax on the bow, soaking up the sun, and feeling the gentle breeze on my face.

But when I pondered this poem, not from a literal point of view, but from a metaphorical point of view of my life with God, I realized, yes, indeed, I do want a boat that goes fast, that heads straight for the those things in life, like the whales, which inspire awe and a sense of magnificence, and that leaps into the spray, drenching away my fears, and leading me into a fully awake life where I deeply trust God to be in control.

I realized that in order to want this life, which I'm not in control of, of a life that leads me beyond the near and safe, a life which I now have, as your priest, which leads me into uncharted waters nearly daily, I need to love God deeply and trust that God desires a wholeness and an aliveness of life for me, which will only draw me into a deeper goodness.

This means I need to first believe, know in the deepest part my heart, not just with my head, that God loves me, but also to know that I love God. Not just believe in God, nor just understand the doctrine of The Episcopal Church or comprehend that we each are God's beloved, but actually to know God's love and then to return that love, with a passion beyond my imagining.

I remember and can tell you about the moment when I realized I had fallen in love with God and I knew that from there on out, that my life was not my own, but was one working in companionship with a Presence beyond my imagination, drawing me out of the near and safe and into the spray of a life fully lived.

Some of you may have had a very similar transformative experience, when God showed up in a dramatic moment or series of moments in your life and you were forever changed. Or some of you may have approached a sense of being in a loving relationship with God through your retrospective analysis of pinpointing the major turning points in your life and, looking back, seeing the hand of God in each one, always drawing you toward something more whole, revealing to you an insight or direction for your life, and you've grown to count on God showing up and taking the lead in your life.

And for probably all of us, there may have been a season in our lives – and it may be now – when we weren't so sure yet that God is trustworthy or that we didn't feel we were God's beloved, and this season feels or felt very dry or cold or barren.

All of these pieces, all of these possibilities, can be a pathway for us to deeply trust that God is the one steering our boat, and that the rudder of the boat, that which gives it stability, is indeed the unending and passionate love of God.

And that thought brings us to the incredible love poem we hear today from the Song of Solomon. There's passion, yearning, consummation, and a sense of being totally transformed by the touch of love. There is no better book in either the Hebrew or the Christian bible to speak to us of love than the Song of Solomon. For who can love or be loved, without being changed, and this poem speaks so clearly of the transformative power of love – for the beloved, upon hearing the invitation to “arise, my love”, is no longer content with the former life behind the lattice and knows that her future and that of the lover are one. And we all may know or remember what it felt like to fall in love for the first time; it really is as though the whole world has changed, that suddenly all around us has risen up to meet us in our love. My sense is that this is what God desires for us – the joy of being completely, foolishly, extravagantly in love, with the source of love, God.

One can look at this text from a very literal point of view, expressing praise and joy over a love two persons can share. It tells us that human love is human love – and it's God's story. For in these beautiful lyrics, God has sanctioned and sanctified the love between two persons. There are no moralistic imperatives in this text, marriage is never mentioned, but rather this text has a doxological intent – that is a joyful praise of human love.

This is one of the texts which is a choice for readings for The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage, and when I first meet a couple, I can almost always tell whether this will be their choice or not. When I married a couple in early summer in Cape Cod, when they shared their readings with me, I was not the least bit surprised this was a chosen text. For they had met in 9th grade, being sweethearts for a year, went off and had their lives, several times connecting again, hearing the call of their beloved, and yet now, in their 60's were bringing that love to fruition in their wedding vows.

And we may find this celebration of passionate and joyous love may be captured in occasions other than weddings. As soon as I read this passage earlier this week, it made me think of a tender and dear photograph displayed at the funeral reception of Bud Kitts – the photo was of Gretchen and Bud, sitting on a bench in their horse barn, settled in mature love, with her head upon his shoulder, and that twinkle in their eyes, which spoke of a life lived well out of a love sanctioned and sanctified by God.

So we can take this passage and enter into it from a very practical and realistic point of view and affirm and celebrate human love and comprehend that it is part of the divine plan for us, for each one of us, one which bears the fruit of joy, wholeness, and well being.

Or we can imagine this text as a messianic text – one which speaks of a fulfillment which is possible only through the arrival of our messiah, our savior, Jesus Christ, for this passage is filled with the reference to the passing of one season to the emergence of another, from the season of winter and the rains, to the season of glad songs, and fruiting trees, and love made complete. This passage can announce to us and help us realize the in breaking of God’s reign, which is intended to happen within each one of our lives, through the birthing of our love of God.

Our text calls us from a season of waiting, watching, and anticipating, when we sit in the quiet dark times of our souls, to a time of being fully alive, with the energy, excitement, and complete focus of a first love.

While on one of our hikes during my pilgrimage last week, I understood in a brand new way what it means to be fully alive and the joy that comes with it – and it is that joy which is raised up in our poem this morning.

I had this epiphany as I was trudging along this rock-strewn trail high upon this mountain. I had learned that I had to watch and plan for where I put my next several steps, not just the next one, but the next two or three, so I could end up in some sort of balanced place. But each time I got through a small patch of challenging trail, I would look up and once again, with complete joy and a sense of newness, allow the beauty of the high desert landscape to change my heart. Every few yards, even though the physical landscape had not radically changed, my spiritual landscape met the beauty anew, and joy erupted. I was fully alive and full of the love of God and God’s creation.

In this text, I believe, we can hear the invitation to respond to God’s love, from our place of being fully alive, and out of the same kind of passion shared between these lovers in our love poem this morning.

For each time we are invited forward to receive the complete self-giving love of Christ in the Eucharist, we are touched by love – and the potential to be forever changed is always there.

This radical hospitality offered to us in the amazing sacrament of Eucharist is a strong directive to us to be focused on love, not laws of purity and concerns of what defiles us, as Jesus pushes back against in Mark's gospel today. Jesus is telling us that what is important is the orientation of our heart, and it's really quite simple, that orientation should be toward love, love of each other, for that is sanctioned and sanctified by God, and for our love of God.

It's interesting, don't you think, that as we move toward perfect love, toward passionate love of God, we in fact move increasingly into a deeper compassion for other people. For we trust something larger than ourselves. We push beyond the near and comfortable of our lives, and encounter the wild and wonderful love, and we respond, fully alive and deeply in love with God.

Amen.