

“Thirsting for God”

I would like to begin by reading you a poem by Mary Oliver. It is from her collection of poems simply entitled *Thirst*. I think it is her best collection of poems because so many of the poems are about faith and her experiences of God. The poem I will read is part of a poem called “Six Recognitions of the Lord.” It is a six-part poem in which Oliver expresses different ways in which she has experienced God. I want to share with you part three.

“I lounge on the grass, that's all. So simple. Then I lie back until I am inside the cloud that is just above me but very high, and shaped like a fish. Or, perhaps not. Then I enter the place of not-thinking, not-remembering, not-wanting. When the blue jay cries out his riddle, in his carping voice, I return. But I go back, the threshold is always near. Over and back, over and back. Then I rise. Maybe I rub my face as though I have been asleep. But I have not been asleep. I have been, as I say, inside the cloud, or, perhaps, the lily floating on the water. Then I go back to town, to my own house, my own life, which has now become brighter and simpler, somewhere I have never been before.”¹

There are a number of reasons I was drawn to this poem. Today at the 10:30 service, we will baptize a three-year-old boy. By that action, we will bring him into the household of God. He will be the newest member of our congregation and the Episcopal Church. There is something about the wonder that Oliver expresses in this poem that speaks to that holy event, the sacrament we call baptism. Sacraments are one of the wonders and mysteries of our faith. They are described as an “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” In other words, baptism is something we see and can experience corporally that signifies something that can only be experienced by the heart.

Holy Communion, something that Andrei will be welcomed to receive today, is another one of those “outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace.” We have the blessed wafer and the wine, which we consume. Whether we believe it is truly the body and blood of Jesus or only a memorial, it is sacred, and we treat it with care. We feel privileged to take the bread and wine. We believe that we are changed inwardly by consuming the food of the Lord’s Supper. We may not feel it in that moment, but something indiscernible does happen. We know it in our bones. Which is why we keep coming back to receive this symbolic meal. A meal that may not fill our belly but fills our heart. It is food for the journey and medicine for the soul.

¹ Mary Oliver, *Thirst*, [Boston: Beacon, 2006] pp.26-28.

Oliver, as she lies in the field under the fish-shaped cloud experiences the inner grace of the mysteries. She tries to describe it not with theological or technical language. Indeed, she says in the first part of “Six Recognitions of the Lord.”

“I know a lot of fancy words.
I tear them from my heart and my tongue.
Then I pray.”²

She adjures the fancy words so as not to get caught up in the jargon that hides the inner grace she is experiencing. The fancy words can be helpful, but we can also use them to protect our hearts. They keep our vulnerable parts safe from the outside where they can be doubted, picked at, deconstructed, and invalidated. Living in Provincetown, Massachusetts, she is surrounded by people who would do just that behind closed doors or to her face. Her experiences are valid and do not need to be examined by others.

I think the writers and participants in our scriptures today are finding themselves in that in-between space that Oliver describes as a place of “not-thinking, not-remembering, not-wanting.” Surprisingly, it is nature in the carping of a Blue Jay that brings her back from that liminal place. She is able to go in and out of that space until she finally rises and goes back to her normal life. It is like those who experienced Jesus on the Road to Emmaus, who have experienced the forgiveness of God, who wonder at the Lord’s promises in times of extremus, who are moved to receive baptism after hearing the words of an Apostle.

But as with all such experiences, she must go back to her everyday existence as symbolized by her town, her house, and her life. But in the aftermath of her liminal experience through that transitional threshold, the everyday is transformed. It “has now become brighter and simpler.” Her places have not been changed, but her perception has changed. The place is normal and familiar, but her perception is so changed that she calls it “some-where I have never been before.”

That is what our experiences of God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit can do to us. Oh, we can say “Pshaw” and discount them, but that is dishonest. It is like reluctantly accepting a gift and then putting it on a shelf in the closet, never to be examined again. Rather than, to stretch the metaphor, keeping the gift on the dresser top to be at hand for examination and returning to see what it is there and how it will continue to manifest in her life.

Do simple things, with simple words, with a silenced mind, and a calm heart. The blue jay will come to break the spell soon enough. Don’t feel like it is a distraction that has ruined the moment. It is part of the moment, too. The part that brings us back to the life where we can recognize the value of the still moment. Where God is revealed palpably and effortlessly. With simple words, simply acknowledged, that profoundly transform.

² Ibid.