

Proper 13 C 2019

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23

Psalm 49:1-11

Colossians 3:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

Long ago, when I was a young teacher –
A very young teacher –
My favorite class and I were reading
The moving death scene
Of some ancient hero,
Who spoke of the meaning and purpose of his life,
And the sorrow and pity,
But noble honor of his early death.

We talked for a while
In abstract terms
About the meaning of life,
What makes a good life,
How we confront death,
When all of a sudden
One student,
My best, most brilliant student,
Looked me in the eye,
And said,
In seeming earnest,
What would you do,
If you found out you had only two hours to live?
And then he gave himself away
With an impish grin.

We were all very young,
It was springtime,
And certainly there was one thought
Foremost in almost everyone's mind.

You little rascal,
I thought to myself –
Actually those were not the words I used to myself.
I stood up straight,
Assumed a pious expression,
And intoned,
I would make my confession.

That, I am happy to say,

Startled and silenced them.
They knew
I was more than half serious.
The other half of me still wonders –
What is the most authentic answer for me?

What is it for you?
If you could choose
One act that would define,
Would crystallize your life,
Would show your values,
Lay bare the beauty of your soul,
What would it be?
What would you choose as coda for your life?

*Tell me, says Mary Oliver,
What is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?*ⁱ

What did Jesus do?
What did Jesus do with his one wild and precious life?

Now, this is an invitation,
Not a threat or even a pop quiz.
I will not ask you – this time –
To talk to each other
Or to raise your hands.
If you want to talk to each other at coffee hour,
Or email me,
Or tell me at the church door,
I welcome your thoughts.

But just for a moment,
I am absolutely serious about this,
How would you, today, right now,
Respond.
I wonder how you would frame this,
What words you would use.
The creed says it one way,
Our Godly Pay lessons use other words,
Sacred poetry like the Four Quartets yet another.
What words would you use?
What did Jesus do
With his one wild and precious life?

Thinking and writing . . .

Each time I asked myself this question,
This past week,
I came up with a different way of trying to say it.
And I'm not going to share any of them right now.

Instead, I'll invite you to consider this:

Among the many things the gospels tell us
Jesus did in his one wild and precious life,
We know this:
He ate, he drank,
He made merry.

Yes, he tells a parable about the folly
Of the anxious and greedy man
Who stores up more and more and more,
Building bigger and bigger barns,
And then says to himself,
Now I can relax,
Eat, drink, and be merry –
Only to find that it's all empty,
Meaningless,
Lost to him.
His life of storing up goods
Turns out to be a puff of wind.

As empty as the outlook of the teacher
In the book of wisdom we call Ecclesiastes.
The teacher of wisdom is an honorable man,
He examines the good life,
Takes careful thought for how to be virtuous,
Believes that there is a God,
But lives without hope.
Lives without any expectation
That God will enter his life,
Or the life of any other human being,
To inspire, guide,
Reconcile, unite.

How do you live in a world where God is distant?
If we have the capacity and the resources,
Then we can make the choice to live
As the teacher of wisdom lived.
It is a reasonable choice –
For those who have the capacity and resources.

The dispassionate, distant,
Measured life of virtue without hope
Has the makings of a good life.

But we who gather here,
Whatever our individual beliefs,
Have chosen to align ourselves with hope.
With a community that chooses hope,
Rash, unreasonable, but compelling hope.
Affirms the possibility of change,
In the face of all evidence to the contrary,
The chance that change can make a life,
A relationship, a people new, healed and whole.
Offers acceptance, welcome,
Reconciliation,
Meaning, freedom, and peace.

We affirm a life where God makes a difference.
A life where God chooses to be active,
To be present,
To offer the divine self
As the first and greatest gift.
Where God pours the divine life,
In its infinite preciousness,
Its boundless wildness,
So that our lives spill out beyond their limits,
Filled to overflowing.

We have chosen to align ourselves with fullness,
Rather than emptiness.
To align ourselves with the life of Jesus.
We can respect the teacher of wisdom,
With his worldly weariness,
But we give our hearts to the wisdom of the holy fool,
In whom all the fullness of God is pleased to dwell.

The life of Jesus is full.
For him,
Eating and drinking,
Making merry,
Are signs that point to the abundance of life,
The sheer gift of God.
Hallmarks of the endless celebration
That is the priceless treasure
Of the gathered people of God.

It is our privilege and our responsibility
To affirm abundance
Even as we see and come alongside
Those whose plates are empty.
To affirm welcome and acceptance
Even as we see God's children
Trapped, caged, thrown back into despair.
To affirm the essential goodness of life
Even as we encounter death.

This is why, like Jesus,
We eat, drink, and make merry.
Not because life is empty,
But because we see beyond the emptiness
To the truth that life is full,
That there is abundance, plenty,
Filled to the brim,
Running over,
An unimaginable bounty.

The teacher of wisdom ate and drank
Because he faced the end without feeling or hope.
The fool in the parable ate and drank
As a reward,
Because he thought he had everything under control.

Whatever you drink,
Sparkling or still,
Water or wine,
Whatever you eat,
Vegan, flexitarian,
Meat and potatoes,
However you make merry,
Does it try to fill the emptiness
Or celebrate the abundance?

We are friends and followers of Jesus,
The one who brought the wild and precious life of God
Into our hearts, our homes, our selves.

What he did,
Is ours to do.

Eat. Drink. Be merry.

ⁱ The Summer Day