

May 14, 2020

Dear Trinity family:

In his poem, *Against Speed*, Jonathan Greene writes:

To be anywhere
you have to speed down
and walk slowly
to know intimately
just your small plot
of earth
that was given to you
by luck and
divine Chance.

•
Driving by—
so many racing
beyond the speed limit—
you learned nothing
except life has
passed you by.

And here, Greene annunciates the essence of spiritual life. It is slow. It is small. It evolves over time, little by little, layer by layer. At Trinity these past months we have been claiming this time of stay-at-home orders, quarantine, and on-line work (for many) as liminal time – a unique temporal space where the way things have been are gone and the new reality has not yet presented itself. Liminal time is, though fraught and exhausting, a rich and spiritually prolific opportunity – a “thin place” where the veil between God and humanity is most sheer and transparent. Together through sermons and conversations, through Adult Forum and writing we have been exploring, a different one each week of Eastertide, five hard spiritual truths available to anyone who is willing to “speed down:”

- 1) Life is hard.
- 2) You are not in control.
- 3) You are not that important.
- 4) Your life is not always about you.
- 5) You are going to die.

For the sermon this Sunday I'll be tackling #4: Your life is not always about you. Pray for me! It's a nut with an impenetrable shell. In my initial attempts to sink down into its theology, I found myself instead thinking about the spiritual life in general as a foundation for going deeper into any one truth or revelation. And then I remembered Greene's poem, and the thought unfurled before me. Here's what I want to say this week – it's about living the spiritual life:

The Spiritual Life is Slow

Anyone in a big existential hurry should not engage the spiritual life. Ever. The pace of the spiritual life is God's pace. The time is God's time. Theologian Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki characterizes it this way: “Think of water as a different metaphor for God. Water rushes to fill all the nooks and crannies available to it; water swirls around every stone, sweeps into every crevice, touches all things in its path – and changes all things in its path. The changes are subtle, often slow, and happen through a continuous interaction with the water that affects both the water and that which the water touches...The water doesn't exert its power by being 'single-minded' over and above these things, but simply by being pervasively present to and with all things. It does not evoke the 'command' of power over its creation; it is more like a 'persuasive' power with and around its creation. Its power

is a power of presence.” Like water wearing down rock over time, the spiritual life is slow, present, patient. It’s the long game, a marathon not a sprint. The spiritual life is slow and we do well to adjust to God’s time (in Greek: “kairos”), or at least set aside intentional time to place ourselves in God’s time.

The Spiritual Life is Layered

I’ve just finished the new novel by Lily King entitled, *Writers and Lovers*. King’s protagonist is thirty-something Casey living in Cambridge, Massachusetts waiting tables, hanging by a thread, grieving the death of her mother, managing relationships and health scares, and trying, hope against hope, to carve out a vocation as a writer. She envisions the evolving of her life and her writing like a painting. “Painters, I told myself, though I know nothing about painting, don’t start at one side of the canvas and work meticulously across to the other side. They create an underpainting, a base of shape, of light and dark. They find the composition slowly, layer after layer.”

The spiritual life, I think, happens like this. We spend time in church community, build relationships, listen, learn, create open space inside our lives for God, engage the scriptures. These doings comprise our “underpainting” – the base of shape, of light and dark, of a spiritual landscape. Over a lifetime we add layer upon layer of experiences, epiphanies, hard-won lessons, self-knowledge, and relationships until the composition and meaning of our lives, slowly, emerges. The spiritual life is patient work, but a kind of art and offering nonetheless.

The Spiritual Life is Small

At our weekly clergy meeting, Chip, Anne, and I began discussing this week’s hard spiritual truth #4: Your life is not always about you. My issue: #4 doesn’t seem to be saying anything much more than #3: You are just not that important. They don’t seem any different to me. Anne seems to be our Trinity guru lately of all things liminal. In our discussion she said: “With these truths we’re talking about small things. We’re talking about subtle things. That’s what Jesus taught about: small, ordinary things.” Jesus uses small things, small interactions and circumstances to make a big point. That’s what Anne was doing in her excellent sermon last Sunday on “You are just not that important.” She found in the Gospel for the day an interaction between two disciples and Jesus – the disciples were volleying to get their own needs met, above each other, above Jesus. Jesus, with a slight-of-hand, redirects. It’s not about you as an individual. You alone are just not that important. It’s about the relationships you have with others, with God, and with me (Jesus) - the connectivity, the interwoven-ness, the place where no one person’s needs are more important than another’s.

Anne’s sermon reminded me of a 2017 “on being” interview with the poet Marie Howe who directed her conversation to the topic of “noticing the small” as the essence of good, spiritual living. She said:

...it hurts to be present...it seems that everything in the western world is trying to tell us this now, even as we’re speeding up and speeding up and staring into our screens. I ask my students every week to write 10 observations of the actual world. It’s very hard for them...just tell me what you saw this morning in two lines. You know ‘I saw a water glass on a brown tablecloth and the light came through it in three places.’ No metaphor. To resist metaphor is very difficult because you have to actually endure the thing itself which hurts us for some reason. We want to look away. Then they say ‘there’s nothing important enough.’ No abstractions, no interpretations allowed. But then this amazing thing happens. In the fourth week

or so, then come in and ‘clickety-clank-clank-clank’ onto the table pours all this stuff. It is so thrilling! Everyone can feel it. The slice of an apple, the gleam of the knife, the sound of the trash can closing, the maple tree and the blue jay. It all just comes clanking into the room, and it’s amazing. They have been present, out of their heads, and just noticing what’s around them and not compare it to anything. Later I tell them to use metaphor on the sixth week, but they don’t want to. ‘Why would I compare that to anything when it is itself so spectacular?’ Then we look at metaphor as a tool not to avoid the object or the observation, but to make it more there.”

In the spiritual life we don’t need to leave the world, we are just being called to see it differently, and to take notice, to pay attention to the little things, the subtle nuances of form and relationship in their own rite, without interpretation or attempting to control them.

Writes Howe in her poem, *The Meadow*: “Bedeviled, human/your plight, in waking/is to choose from the words/that even now sleep on your tongue, and to know that tangled/among them and terribly new/is the sentence that could change your life.” The spiritual life is a confusing and new business, but within our grasp. We know this because it’s about the ordinary, the subtle, the small. It’s about collecting one insight at a time, one experience, one feeling, one moment that, together, construct a lifetime of spiritual engagement and awareness. It happens at a pace in which we can all keep up, slowly and deliberately. Like water it cajoles and coaxes, calls and pulls.

What’s Helping Me Right Now

The first thing is incredibly simple. Every day I walk, bike ride, or run. And it’s that time of year when, if you’re moving around outside, from time to time you get a whiff of a flowering tree somewhere. You usually can’t see the tree that’s perfuming the air, but it smells so sweet and fresh and good. I love that. And the lilacs are almost blooming. For a few weeks it’s going to be bursts of sweet smells and flowering buds.

I’m reading some fantastic literature right now. Here’s my most recent list – all recommended:

Writers and Lovers (Lily King)

The Complete *Persepolis* (Marjane Satrapi)

Virgil Wander (Leif Enger)

Our Story Begins: New and Selected Stories (Tobias Wolff)

Blessing

A blessing for Presence by John O’Donohue, from his book *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*.

Awaken to the mystery of being here
and enter the quiet immensity of your own presence.

Have joy and peace in the temple of your senses.

Receive encouragement when new frontiers beckon.

Respond to the call of your gift and the courage to follow its path.

Let the flame of anger free you of all falsity.

May warmth of heart keep your presence aflame.

May anxiety never linger about you.

May your outer dignity mirror an inner dignity of soul.

Take time to celebrate the quiet miracles that seek not attention.

Be consoled in the secret symmetry of your soul.

May you experience each day as a sacred gift woven around the heart of wonder.

Amen.

Much love to you and yours. Remember: I'm here. Trinity is here. You are not alone.

Devon