



Rev Chris Taylor - 4-7-19
Great Things

I've been spending some time, the last couple of months, with the poet Mary Oliver. She has been good company. I think perhaps it was her obituary in the New York Times that led me to her. She died just this past January. Or maybe it wasn't the Times, maybe it was Tara Woodard Lehman, our new associate. We were talking in my office the morning she preached, and she mentioned one of Oliver's poems and quoted a line at the end. I remember thinking how much I liked that line.

So the Times or Tara, or maybe it was just a happy coming together of the two, but whatever the cause, I ordered several volumes and I've been enjoying them ever since. They have a place on my desk, and from time to time I'll pick one up and read from whatever page I happen to turn to. I love her work; so much of it based on her observations of nature. And her poems are accessible; you don't need a dictionary or encyclopedia to figure them out. But most of all, they are beautiful and vulnerable and intimate, thoughtful and poignant. One example:

This morning the green fists of the peonies are getting ready/to break my heart/as the sun rises,/as the sun strokes them with his old, buttery fingers

and they open --/pools of lace,/white and pink--/and all day the black ants climb over them,

boring their deep and mysterious holes/into the curls,/craving the sweet sap,/taking it away

to their dark, underground cities--/and all day/under the shifty wind,/as in a dance to the great wedding,/

the flowers bend their bright bodies,/and tip their fragrance to the air,/and rise,/their red stems holding/

all that dampness and recklessness/gladly and lightly,/and there it is again -
-/beauty the brave, the exemplary,

blazing open./Do you love this world?/Do you cherish your humble and silky
life?/Do you adore the green grass, with its terror beneath?

Do you also hurry, half-dressed and barefoot, into the garden,/and
softly,/and exclaiming of their dearness,/fill your arms with the white and
pink flowers,

with their honeyed heaviness, their lush trembling,/their eagerness/to be wild
and perfect for a moment, before they are/nothing, forever?!

Peonies are a perennial, of course. They bloom every year, and can last for as long as a hundred years. So why do they break Oliver's heart? Because of the open, vulnerable way in which they offer the whole of themselves to this world even amid the onslaught of ravaging ants. There is invitation here, and challenge: the invitation to embrace life as these flowers do – to resist the impulse to withdraw into a protective shell; and the challenge to ourselves instead to this great gift of life, even knowing (as we do) that the gift cannot and will not last forever.

Isn't that the kind of rich, abundant life that you just know God wants us to have – free and joyous, full and rich and beautiful? But where do we find the courage to live that kind of life; to pour ourselves out even when we know the black ants are there, stirring just beneath the surface?

The psalmist shows us the way. We don't know the context that gave rise to this psalm, but it is clear that there is some struggle that has come his way. The fourth and fifth verses are our clue, "Restore our fortunes, O Lord... May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy."

Tough times have come; times that bring to the psalmist's mind the dry creek-beds of the Negeb desert. Maybe the people are under attack of some kind. Maybe they've just experienced some heart-rending loss. Or maybe they have been caught in a prolonged drought that raises the possibility of a failed harvest and a winter of starvation to follow.

We don't know. But we do know that such times are a part of life. And that's the great irony: that we can live in such a beautiful world; a world of such extraordinary abundance seemingly custom-designed to meet our every need; and

yet heart-break and struggle are so much a part of it. No one gets through unscathed. It is gorgeous peonies with black holes drilled through them.

So do we retreat? Do we pull back and withdraw from life in an effort to protect ourselves from all the difficult stuff that's out there? That's not what the psalmist did. He moved in the opposite direction. He moves towards life and towards the struggle and towards that God who stands as our center.

He begins by remembering God's faithfulness. This, he recalls, is the same God who delivered the captives; the same God who brought the exiles home – who restored their fortunes and filled their mouths with laughter. The horror was certainly there, the exile happened, but God never turned away. God was at work, even there. And ultimately God in all his faithfulness and love brought them back.

Whatever might be going on in your life right now, know that God hasn't abandoned you. That's not God's nature. That's not the God we see in the pages of Scripture, or encounter in the person of Jesus. God will never abandon us.

Knowing that, the psalmist turns to God in his distress. He doesn't run away from the struggle. He moves towards life; towards what's going on; and brings his struggle before the Lord. "Restore our fortunes, O Lord... may those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy."

At first the final verse sounds like a repeat of the one just before, but pay attention to the shift that happens here: Verse 5, "May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy." That's a request. Now verse 6, "Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves." That's a claim of faith. Our future lies in God's hands, and ultimately God can and will deliver us. As tough as things might get here, we know who wins in the end. "They **shall** come home with shouts of joy... shall be found carrying the fruits of an abundant harvest."

When we are struggling, even the simplest task can feel overwhelming. Just going into the fields and planting the seeds can feel like too much; feel like a great waste of time. The peonies could hold back, saying "Look at the ants, they're just going to ruin everything. Why try?"

But that's no way to live this life. No, we find the courage, the motivation, to keep pouring ourselves into life knowing that we aren't alone, that God is there,

that God hears our prayers and that God is very much at work. We pour ourselves into life because we believe, finally, that even if we're given no more than a few hours to bloom, how much better, how much more beautiful, to have had those hours – to have given this life our very best – than to waste away in some hidden corner out of fear and trepidation.

Do you love this world? Do you cherish your humble and silky life?... Do you also hurry, half-dressed and barefoot, into the garden, and softly, and exclaiming of their dearness, fill your arms with the white and pink flowers, with their honeyed heaviness, their lush trembling, their eagerness *to be wild and perfect for a moment*, before they are nothing, forever?

ⁱ Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poem, Vol. 1*, "Peonies", (Beacon Press, Boston, 1992), pp. 21,22