

Look at the Birds of the Air

Matthew 6: 25 – 33

Thanksgiving, 2006

Remember a sunny autumn day when you walked under a blue sky, beneath a canopy of flaming trees, feeling the clearness of air, the warmth of an autumn sun and your soul sang with delight.

Remember a mountain vista that you reached after a long walk or car ride, that moment when you could gaze out over valley and lake to see the miracle of mountains rising into blueness.

Remember a night when you stood outdoors looking up at the stars, countless in the high, silent dome of the sky, and saw them as if for the first time. What happened? Eugene O'Neill puts it this way: "For a moment I lost myself – actually lost my life. I was set free! I dissolved in the...high dim-starred sky! I belonged, without past or future, within peace and unity and a wild joy, within something greater than my own life...to Life itself! To God, if you want to put it that way. For a second you see – and seeing the secret, are the secret. For a second there is meaning!"

There are moments that draw us into the mystery of being, moments where we forget ourselves, our limitations, our mundane worries and experience the reality of belonging, completely and utterly, to Life, to God. They are times of deep gratefulness. In such moments we embrace joy, receive life in abundance, know awe.

Jesus, who wants us to have life, in all its fullness, invites us into mystery. "Look at the birds of the air," he says. Playful, free birds, full of song, quick to move, colourful cardinals and goldfinches. "Consider the lilies of the field, clothed in glory," he says. Fresh, vibrant lilies, waving on slender stems as the breeze moves among them. Jesus invites us to move out of ourselves, out of the concerns and worries that invade our lives and hold us captive, out into the big arena of Life. Here, among the plants and animals of creation, we remember that we belong. We are part of something marvellous. We are part of a creation that dances with life, that dances with God. We belong in this created world. We belong to the One who choreographs the universe.

It is the simplicity of these moments of mystery that we recall. Complexities fall away and we are reminded of what is most real – that life is a gift, that beauty is around us, that joy is here. But so much of

the time, we are prisoners of a culture of money, of greed and guilt. Instead of gratefulness, we feel dissatisfied and discontented. There must be more to life than this, we think. I should be more. I should do more. I should have more. Subtly, the culture around us corrodes the connections of our soul to the universe and we lose touch with the powerful experience of gratefulness.

It is hard to see the captivity we are caught in, so much is it part of our lives. It is hard to imagine other ways of living. In the Bible, there is a period of Jewish history that can help us remember God's liberation from captivity. Israel was conquered by the great empire, Babylon and many of its people taken into captivity in Babylon. This was a pivotal time for the formation of Jewish identity. Prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel told the people why they were in such captivity. The prophets did not tell the people that they were innocent and helpless victims of a ruthless superpower. Instead, they gave the unpopular message that people were in captivity because of choices they had made, because they had worshipped what they had produced and manufactured, things made of money, of silver and gold. It is said that the people were even willing to sacrifice their own offspring for consumption, offering them to Moloch, the god who ate children.

Long before the armies of Babylon marched into Israel, burning and looting and taking away prisoners, the people were already in captivity. Their prison was the illusion that they could buy and sell identity, meaning and happiness. The problem was not that people engaged in economic activity. The problem was that they began to worship it, and submitted their whole lives to its demands. And so people of Israel were taken away to captivity in Babylon. But it was not the poor who were taken – they stayed behind, no threat to the Babylonian masters. It was the elites, the religious and intellectual elites and the skilled workers who were forced to go, people who would be controlled and used by their captors.

Far away from home, far away from the rubble that had been temple and courthouse, far away from the traditions, places and institutions that had given life meaning, the captives wept. But gradually, they began to reflect on life. They were surrounded by the gods of the Babylonian empire, by the symbols of power. They thought about the differences between those gods and the God who once freed a group of slaves and led them through wilderness to a new home. They thought about a God who created the world out of nothing but love. It was in this time of captivity that the beautiful poetry that opens the book of Genesis was written: "In the beginning God created the

heavens and the earth..." God set the universe in motion, created life in all its myriad forms, made man and woman in the image of God and said it was all good. Held in captivity, these poets claimed the freedom that God intended for all people, the freedom of justice, of the goodness of creation, of the love that called all life into being. Prisoners of a foreign power, they were freed to see the genuine power at the centre of reality. That power was love. Their response was one of gratefulness that issued in beautiful poetry. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

A thousand years later another poet looked at people suffering under the oppression of yet another empire and said: " Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them....Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these." Like the birds of the air, like the lilies of the field, you are created and loved by God. Like the birds of the air, like the lilies of the field, you are provided for. Let go of the anxiousness, let go of fearful grasping, let go and breathe. God knows your deepest needs.

Canadian theologians, the prophets of our time, call us to recognize that we have become prisoners, that our lives and our souls are held captive by a culture of money. They call us to resist that captivity through the power of memory. Remember who created this world. Remember that, like the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, we are beloved and beautiful. Remember that we are connected to all forms of life, a part of the universe, interdependent with the rest of creation. Those peak experiences under a starry sky or on a mountaintop or under an autumn canopy are times of wonder. In their grip, we know we belong. Gratefulness flows from this.

One spiritual practice that helps us resist captivity is the practice of simplicity. Simplicity invites us to think carefully about what material things we really need. We are realizing more and more the energy it takes to secure, maintain and discard goods and resources. Yesterday I took a walk in my neighbourhood and went past a yard sale. There were many large toys made of plastic sitting along the driveway, not purchased. I thought about the excitement of having your children, the attraction of buying bright sturdy toys for them and imagining their pleasure at play. And then, a few years down the road, the same toys become a problem to deal with, taking valuable space in our homes, too good to throw away but not the latest model. Do they go to landfills and gradually break down to poison the earth and water?

And those are only the toys of childhood. What about the toys of adulthood!

The practice of simplicity invites us to think about our lives in relation to the creation around us and the other people of the world. It helps us resist the relentless pressures to compete and to accumulate. It does not offer easy answers because living simply involves complex choices along the way. But the spiritual practice can help remove some of the corrosion that interferes with our ability to see the birds of the air and the lilies of the field.

We move from the mystery of experience into gratitude. In gratitude, we know that we are part of all that is, we know that we belong. Our gratitude flows into thanksgiving as we turn toward the One who created and creates, who loved us into being and loves us now, who calls us to live with one another and this world in respect. In thanksgiving, we embrace spiritual practices that help us tie our daily living, our choices, to that creative and liberating Love. Living simply so that others can simply live is a way that makes every day one of thanksgiving.

Rev. Diane Blanchard

October 8, 2006