

Order of Service  
***Dealing with Loneliness***  
Sunday, December 14, 2008

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**Declaration** (unison reading)

Love is the spirit of this fellowship  
And service is its law.  
This is our great covenant:  
To dwell together in peace,  
To seek truth in love,  
And to help one another.

~ James Vila Blake

**Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting**

Warm light of a crackling wood fire,  
Calls us together when we come in  
From the winter storm.  
So we come in to this holy place  
To gather in the light and warmth  
Of our chalice, symbol of love.  
Let us worship together.

**Meditation and Prayer**

We reflect on the particular gifts of winter.  
The black-cloaked crows on bare branches  
Soaked and slouching in a steady rain?  
The ice at the edges of puddles and streams?  
The snow geese swirling like a snow flurry  
Over the green Skagit fields.  
Walking the empty roads late in the evening,  
When all the people are in their houses.  
Crystal stars in a midnight sky.

Beauty has a new face in this season,  
And a quieter way of being.

What do you notice of Beauty in these shorter days?  
What winter gems are opening your heart?

Now in silence.

Amen.

## Readings

“The Leaf and the Cloud,” by Mary Oliver

When loneliness comes stalking, go into the fields, consider  
the orderliness of the world. Notice  
something you have never noticed before,

like the tambourine sound of the snow-cricket  
whose pale green body is no longer than your thumb.

Stare hard at the hummingbird, in the summer rain,  
shaking the water-sparks from its wings.

Let grief be your sister, she will whether or no.  
Rise up from the stump of sorrow, and be green also,  
like the diligent leaves.

A lifetime isn't long enough for the beauty of this world  
and the responsibilities of your life.

Scatter your flowers over the graves, and walk away.  
Be good-natured and untidy in your exuberance.

In the glare of your mind, be modest.  
And beholden to what is tactile, and thrilling.

“The Serious Moment,” by Rainier Maria Rilke

Who ever cries somewhere in the world,  
who ever cries without reason in the world,  
cries because of me.

Whoever laughs somewhere in the night,  
who laughs without reason in the night,  
is laughing at me.

Whoever walks somewhere in the world,  
who without reason roams around the world,  
is coming to me.

Whoever is dying somewhere in the world,  
who without reason dies in the world,  
is looking at me.

Something like loneliness rises like the tide during the holidays. In the midst of the joyful greetings and happy gatherings, there is something that seeps in around the corners of our defenses, as the persistent ocean presses against the joints of a sea wall, opening cracks, and splashing the seaside town with saltwater on the rising tide. For many that feeling of loneliness is a regular part of the season.

It's all those darn "visions of sugar plums dancing in our heads." I'm sure there's nothing wrong with a good sugar plumb now and then, though I must admit I've never actually seen one. Surely I've never seen a sugar plum tree. We form these magical visions of what the holidays *could be*, or perhaps its even that we press ourselves into dreams of what the holidays *should be* or *must be* if we're to experience the full joy of the season.

Every year we try to do more to achieve a truly great holiday season. Maybe our eighth principle is the "free and responsible search for love and cheer." After a few years, or a few decades, there seems so much to do, and we try to get it all done, as if to keep the rising sea of loneliness from salting down that sweetness of the season that we remember, or imagine that we remember.

I know some people who are reversing that trend this year. Deciding what *not* to do. Clearing the way for what matters most. Simple things like time to be together. Or even time to be alone.

Welsh poet Dylan Thomas writes of a Christmas Day in a seaside town on the coast of Wales where he was born. For me it is one of the imaginative journeys I make each December. It promises, even in the humble setting of a poor town, even with the oddities of family, even with the worst winter storm in memory—it promises warmth, and joyful connections. Yet this is Thomas' imagination or memory enhanced by dreaming, enriched by story telling. We know also that he was a man who felt the depths of loneliness during his tumultuous and brief 39 years.

It's captivating, this vision of family connection that Thomas creates:

For dinner we had turkey and blazing pudding, and after dinner the Uncles sat in front of the fire, loosened all buttons, put their large moist hands over their watch chains, groaned a little and slept. Mothers, aunts and sisters scuttled to and fro, bearing tureens. Auntie Bessie, who had already been frightened,

twice, by a clock-work mouse, whimpered at the sideboard and had some elderberry wine. The dog was sick. Auntie Dosie had to have three aspirins, but Auntie Hannah, who liked port, stood in the middle of the snowbound back yard, singing like a big-bosomed thrush. I would blow up balloons to see how big they would blow up to; and then, when they burst, which they all did, the Uncles jumped and rumbled. In the rich and heavy afternoon, the Uncles breathing like dolphins and the snow descending, I would sit among festoons and Chinese lanterns and nibble dates and try to make a model man-o'-war, following the Instructions for Little Engineers, and produce what might be mistaken for a sea-going tramcar.

And then, at tea the recovered Uncles would be jolly; and the ice cake loomed in the center of the table like a marble grave. Auntie Hannah laced her tea with rum, because it was only once a year.

When I read Thomas I reflect on my own memories. I remember, enriched by the romantic yearnings of the heart, my own uncles and cousins on Christmas Eve, when we all gathered at my “Oma’s” house in Tacoma. I wax eloquent about the abundant cakes and cookies, the presents under the tree, and the pride when an older cousin would ask you to play a game. It’s a story I tell. But was it actually that warm and fuzzy?

There’s nothing wrong with telling stories. There’s nothing wrong with an intention toward magic. Indeed, it’s a proven fact, that magic is a lot more likely to happen if you *do* intend it. We build these dreams to keep the saltwater out of our holidays, and sometimes it works. But at least part of the time, and for some of us, most of the time, the “visions of sugarplums” don’t measure up to the reality of cold, rainy days, of long nights, and of connections that come to us only intermittently during a season when people tend to withdraw into their homes and into themselves. It is an interior season, a time of dormancy and hibernation. It takes going out and working on making the loving connections happen. Part of us is saying, “Why not wait until spring?”

There is a tension between the stories we tell ourselves about all the special connections that *should* happen in the holidays, contrasted against the ordinary, the plain, even the hum-drum-ness of what actually takes place.

I'm remembering a time, in a congregation like this one, when a man came forward during one of the services before Christmas to say how separations from his family had led to feeling down and disconnected. He anticipated that the weeks ahead would be full of loneliness, and he wanted people to walk with him through a hard time. There were a few who offered points of connection, but it was hardly enough to keep the rising tide of loneliness at bay. It was a bleak holiday season for him. He weathered it, but he told me afterward how disappointed he was that others had been unable or unwilling to invite him in to whatever warmth and joy they'd planned for the holiday.

It's one of the responses to loneliness that can make a difference this time of year. It requires first that courageous step of declaring one's isolation and despondency. It requires *then* that those who hear find in their hearts a sincere "Yes!"—to create opportunities for real inclusion. If we are about fellowship, about beloved community, would this not be a measure of that intention? Might this be our practice in this season, even if we have to go out of our way a bit?

Fritz Perls, the so-called father of Gestalt Psychology, gives us a further clue about loneliness. As with any form of suffering, there is for Perls the core sensation or condition upon which we build an edifice of dysphoria.

Some years ago I injured my back climbing through a window to unlock a friend's door. The disc in my back was clearly pressing on a nerve, and I felt pain down my leg into my foot. My doctor suggested that surgery may not be the best answer, and there is actually good evidence now that a ruptured disc will become reabsorbed over three or four months. But having the sensation morning and night, day in and day out, week after week, month after month out, got me into some pretty fancy gymnastics in my mind.

- What if the pain never goes away?
- Will I never be able to ski again?
- Will I never be able to make mad, passionate love again?
- Maybe I'd better not do the dishes, dear.
- Oh, wasn't I brave to go through that window?
- Oh, don't you feel sorry for me? I sure do!

The stories I began to tell about the painful sensations in my back began to get more and more complex. My ego took advantage of those sorry stories and thoughts, creating a world of *suffering* from the chronic sensations in my back. The *suffering* I experienced was not merely the back injury. The *suffering* was based on all the mental gymnastics that I piled on top of that injury. It's as if I became my suffering for a time.

Perls puts it this way. Ten percent of suffering is the core situation or sensation. Ninety percent of suffering is opinion about and the stories we tell ourselves about that sensation.

Loneliness is a kind of suffering. The core situation is finding ourselves alone. But being *alone* is not the same as being *lonely*. The struggle that many of us have with loneliness is the suffering based on the thoughts and stories we have about our aloneness. It's not just that we are alone but that we become loneliness for a time.

- Will I ever find a partner again?
- What's wrong with me?
- I guess I'm really not very attractive or loveable?
- Oh, woe is me.

As a psychologist Perls points out that we can deal with the suffering that arises from our pain by acknowledging or embracing that sensation and learning to do a lot less of the self talk about it. By doing this we reduce our suffering to the 10 percent that is the sensation itself. In the case of suffering loneliness, our job would be to acknowledge or embrace our aloneness, releasing all the thoughts and stories that turn our aloneness into suffering.

Embracing aloneness this time of year has become for me a central practice of the season. I think I first learned this from my sister, Betsy. Now, Betsy lives a single life. She always has and probably always will. On Christmas Day, throughout her adult life, she's taken time to be alone, enjoying the solitude of the season for its own sake. She takes long walks in the woods or at the seashore. She makes bread and roasts a fowl, and enjoys a simple feast by herself.

It used to be I'd tell myself stories about Betsy's situation, that in fact she was really *lonely*. For years I tried to involve her in my family's Christmas celebrations. You see, I projected suffering onto her aloneness that had more to do with me than her. Finally I got it. She valued the alone time deeply. The solitude

was sacred to her. Being alone matched the muted colors of coming winter, the bare branches of the trees, and the cold, rainy days. The time alone let her align the inner pace of her heart with the outer pace of the natural world.

Observe and learn. What a shift I experienced when I stopped running away from the possibility that the season was an opening into an entirely different order of beauty. I realized that my opportunity was to connect less with fantasies about holidays gone by and to receive the connections offered by this real world, as it is, right now. There's nothing I love better during the holidays than to take a time out from the busy flow of family and friends, to get outside, especially at dawn or dusk, and and to go for a run in a gentle rain.

This is the prescription that our wonderful poet Mary Oliver offers with our reading today. Faced with loneliness, pay attention to what is. Let go of what you don't have, which is mostly the product of stories you tell yourself. Come into the present moment of what you *do* have, of brown leaves and grey clouds. Let them bring you out of the lonely stories of a suffering mind. In the present moment is where we will find joy, and peace, and connection. We leave loneliness behind as we notice and embrace who we are and where we are, alone with beauty. From Oliver again:

When loneliness comes stalking, go into the fields, consider  
the orderliness of the world. Notice  
something you have never noticed before,

A lifetime isn't long enough for the beauty of this world

In the glare of your mind, be modest.  
And beholden to what is tactile, and thrilling.

Let this be our call. Let us come out of the stories of our mind into what is important—into what actually is. In this moment beauty and healing will embrace us if we let it.

We hear again from Dylan Thomas. Where is he at the end of the day, after all the gifts, revelry and relatives? This from the conclusion of *A Child's Christmas in Wales*:

It was very warm in the little house. Auntie Hannah, who had got on to the parsnip wine, sang a song about Bleeding Hearts and Death, and then

another in which she said her heart was like a Bird's Nest; and then everybody laughed again; and then I went to bed. Looking through my bedroom window, out into the moonlight and the unending smoke-colored snow, I could see the lights in the windows of all the other houses on our hill and hear the music rising from them up the long, steadily falling night. I turned the gas down, I got into bed. I said some words to the close and holy darkness, and then I slept.

What are your close and holy words this season? In what solitude may they become your prayer?

Amen.