

In this morning's collect that Richard read at the beginning of the service, we prayed,

*“Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure.”*

Sounds like really great advice, doesn't it? getting our values right, not being anxious, putting our faith in things that don't let us down? The question is, how do we get from here to there? This morning I'd like for us to look at ways in which the answer to that question is right in front of our faces.

A few months ago, I read an article about Charles Darwin that quoted half a dozen well-known scientists as saying, to a man (or woman) that though their own work was of course based on Darwin's theory of evolution, they themselves had never actually read his works, never read the *Origin of Species*—the inference being that it was boring, and that what it said, they already knew. So being very interested in the whole religion versus science debate and sensing a challenge, I set to work on my own, and have gotten most of the way through my soft-bound copy over the last six months. Unsurprisingly, it has tended to color almost everything I see.

In the book, Darwin teaches his readers all the things we now learn routinely in biology class, but that came as a shocking revelation to the readers of his day: the extent to which the world we live in—the natural world--teems with life-forms—swarms of insects in their hundreds of millions, hatching and rising in clouds from the surface of a lake—that are

born, procreate and die in the space of a single day. Lifting our eyes from the page—or perhaps from our Kindle--it's impossible not to look out at the world around us with changed eyes; a profound awareness of the impermanence of life.

This is a concept that's foundational to Buddhism: all is change, nothing stays the same. And in fact, there's a similar understanding in the worldviews of almost all religions, including our own. Jesus points out to his disciples—gently, I would like to imagine, because underneath his poetic images, it's a hard truth--the fact that the flowers and grasses of the field that they see around them every day, each one of them more richly arrayed than Solomon in all his glory, are utterly ephemeral: here today, tomorrow cut down and thrown into the fire. “You are dust,” the Lord God tells Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, “and to dust you shall return”—all of us, without a single exception.

On a personal level, this idea doesn't bother me at all. As one who lives most of my spiritual life in the garden, I am highly aware of the constant exchange that exists among the soil and the air and the sun and the rain; oxygen and earthworms; minerals and mulch. I have left instructions that I want to be buried directly in the earth, without a casket, and I like to imagine that the grass above me, a year or so later, will be an unnatural emerald green. But that is because I see everything—life, death, impermanence, human generation and connection—as being what the novelist and theologian Charles Williams calls, “under the Mercy”, “under the Omnipotence” of God. All within the plan.

In a new biography of William Golding, the author of Lord of the Flies, Golding relates a childhood memory he had of his father—a loving person, a schoolmaster, but stymied, Golding came to believe, by his rigorous scientific atheism and his disappointment at what he felt to be his own failure in life. Out on a walk one day, his father “finds a baby rabbit which seems unable to move. He strokes it and puts it in a sunny spot, but the next day finds it dead, and feels kinship with it because, like him, it has failed in the universal fight for survival—‘poor little beggar’,” he says.

Surely we have all experienced—even those of a naturally cheerful and optimistic nature—the anguish in that moment of recognition. It may seem to us at times that this fleeting quality of life, this sense that nothing is actually stable, nothing can be counted on to stay in one place and not move the minute you take your eyes off it—this can at times feel almost unbearable to us as human beings. So our unconscious(es) very cleverly come up with all sorts of fantasies that will make things appear to be nailed down and solid—whether it’s the material solidity of a house or a car, or any kind of future, complete with details, that our minds invent—all this to ease the stark reality of this unending transformation from one thing into another that is the essence of life. It’s for this reason that we treasure anything that will for a moment at least seem to stop the planets in their motion; to capture time. It might be a scrapbook we’ve lovingly put together of our lives, or those of our children; it might be a special piece of music between lovers that for a moment brings back the time they first met, when it seemed that that feeling would last forever.

Yet over the years we begin to understand that no matter how carefully we nail it all down—hammer it in and wrap it up in duct tape--it's going to change. Maybe that's what gives us the sense of hope we get from looking at our children: we may have come to terms with the fact of our own mortality, but they will go on—and their children after them. It's why people respond so strongly to reminders from public figures about the kind of world we want to leave to them—a kind of immortality, even though we may not live to see it

Recently I've been rereading a spiritual classic that many of you may know: a little book called The Practice of the Presence of God, by Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence was seventeenth century monk, a man of very humble beginnings who, having once been a footman to a wealthy banker, but calling himself “a great awkward fellow who broke everything”, finds happiness and satisfaction by entering a monastery. After a period of misery and guilt, he comes up with a different way of going about things, something he called “the practice of the presence of God”. What he did was, he simply thought about God all day long, loved God with all his heart and, when he fell short, simply confessed his faults to God very humbly and, having done so, returned quite happily to his chores in the kitchen--washing dishes, scrubbing the floor, occasionally being sent on an errand into town. The simple, almost childlike quality of his life and faith has struck generations of restless men and women as the very essence of the spiritual life.

Unfortunately, very few of us are able to make the choice that Brother Lawrence made, even if we want to. For better or for worse, most of us are not at liberty to leave the world behind us so totally. We have given hostages

to fortune, as they say. We have formed ties that bind--ties that bring us both satisfaction and an element of irksome restraint. Ask any of the couples who come forward here in this church to celebrate their thirtieth and fortieth and fiftieth anniversaries. They will tell you stories of innumerable riches of love and selfless giving, of sacrifices willingly—or not so willingly--made, along with a slow, steady buildup of something, yes, that is solid and can be counted on, something that will endure.

Because the Good News is that in the midst of all this ceaseless flux and flow of life--this constant juggling act of balance falling into imbalance and back to balance again--God in God's great love for us has provided innumerable way-stations, places where we can pause and take a breath and look around us, where even in the most reduced and difficult circumstances--if we keep our minds and hearts open to the grace of God--we are given glimpses of that unchanging life the collect calls "heavenly". The life that exists not somewhere in the future, after we die, but here, around us all the time: an Aspen tree like a spill of golden coins in the sun; a cake that turns out just right; a man hurrying to the subway station, noticing out of the corner of his eye someone who can't make it down the stairs and stopping to help. These are the moments of *exchange*: exchange between ourselves and others, between ourselves and God; moments in which time itself no longer has to be wrestled to the ground and pinned (which is impossible, anyway) but seems to slow and expand, opening to a broader view of things around us. More color and feeling than we had remembered; a sense of absolute freedom, where a moment ago our spirits had been crowded and cramped.

I am aware that what I'm trying to describe may seem like the purest mumbo-jumbo to those who are not in the habit—or have lost the habit--of

noticing this sense of unlimited freedom that can happen in the space of a second. If you need something more concrete to picture, just look at a child! the one sitting next to you, or who'll be looking up and down the pews for you in a few minutes. Or remember—try to remember—what it was like when you yourself were a child, in that flow of open wonderment when time as adults know it simply did not exist. Surely this must be what Jesus meant when he “took the little child and put it among them”...and took it in his arms, saying that to welcome one such child in his name is to welcome God.

It's not so difficult to love things heavenly, in the midst of all that is passing away. You just have to open your eyes. Try it.. It's all good.

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