

One Day You Finally Knew...
Ray Bagnuolo, August 2, 2009
Jan Hus Presbyterian Church, New York City

Reading: John 6: 24-35

A friend of mine, by the name of TJ, is very fond of poet Mary Oliver. So fond, in fact, that he sometimes just breaks out into her poems, oblivious to who or whatever else might be around him.

We vacation in the same place on Long Island, and last week, as we were having dinner, something struck him and off he went. I've learned to listen to TJ, because he really does have a gift for reciting poetry and he usually chooses some pretty good poems.

As he looked across the table, he began...(from Mary Oliver's *The Journey*)

One day you finally knew
What you had to do, and began,
Though the voices around you kept shouting
Their bad advice –
Though the whole house began to tremble
And you felt the old tug
At your ankles
“Mend my life!”

There's more...and as he finished, I asked him to recite it again. As TJ did, I began to think about this morning's reading and how John the Evangelist and Mary the poet, go together.

John tells us that:

When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they themselves got into the boats, heading to Capernaum looking for him.

This section of John continues from where Ellen left us off last week.

Jesus is pulling them in. By First Century standards, the crowds were enormous and continuing to grow. More were coming to see and hear the amazing things Jesus was doing and saying.

Maybe as in Oliver verses, they, too, had grown tired of their lives, tired of listening to the bad advice shouted at them, the orders of the Roman government and controlling armies. Suddenly there was a new voice they heard, with a message of hope and promise; a new prophet of growing popularity, and

desperate as they were – they followed – still hoping that the “mending of their lives” might be with this Jesus of Nazareth.

Did they think of Jesus as the magician, the magic man, who with a snap of a finger or command to the heavens was going to feed them again; fill them with his charisma, and heal the terrible the pain and suffering that was a part of their every day life?

And their lives were tough. Ever since the occupation of Palestine in 63 BCE by the Roman general Pompey and the desecration of the Temple at his hands, it had been tough going. True, we don't live *exactly* in the same oppressive times, but we do live in times of justice seeking for all. We know what it is like to suffer loss and to long for healing...to look for answers...

In line with that, I am still thinking about what happened just a week ago. You likely have heard about it.

On July 26th, 8 people were killed in a horrendous accident on the Taconic State Parkway, a road I traveled every day on my way to teaching school in Ossining. Among the deceased were 4 children. One five-year old is recovering in the PICU (Pediatric Intensive Care Unity) at Westchester Medical Center in Valhalla, NY. Another place I know well from my days of Chaplaincy internships.

In my own life, I have known those fitful nights of half sleep and nightmares, only to wake up and remember that the nightmares were not dreams.

At some times in my life, I have prayed for the raising of the dead and cures for others – seeking the miracles I had read about in the Bible. And, when they didn't come, I doubted, questioned, and sought some way to make sense of it all, or at least to stop hurting. And I sought answers from God, sometimes quite angrily...

I thought of these things, this week, of you, me, and of these families.

These thoughts and others came to me as I prepared for this morning. Wondering how this worship and the celebration we share fills times and places of sorrow, as well as joy. I mean, it all comes together **here**, so we can go out **there**...shouldn't it?

How do we live in the midst of life on life's terms... and make a difference?

We are here, in worship, reading about the stories of what people did based on their faith and their longing. We follow them as they move past the trying and turbulent times of their lives 2000 years ago. And, somewhere, between then and now, there is a connection – and it is here – and in places like this.

There is a source of comfort and hope and peace and joy for us, in abundance – but it doesn't happen in isolation. Even Jesus had companions, a community, and a source of his power. Throughout his ministry and teaching, he often repeated that the deeds he did were not of his own doing but of the One who sent him. Believe in him, he would say, so that you, too, could know the One who sent him. The One he referred to as Abba.

Some got it, they did. And others... well,

John tells in this morning's readings that after Jesus slipped away from the crowds, following a long day of preaching, healing, teaching...they crowds managed to find him in Capernaum on the other side of the Sea of Tiberius, where Jesus' home base was located. When they finally did come upon him they peppered him with questions:

Jesus, Where have you been? They asked.
Jesus, How did you get here? They wanted to know.
Jesus, We've been looking for you? They said to let him know how they missed him.

"Jesus," he must have thought, "give me a break!"

His reply was as it often was: a challenge to them, saying that they only sought him because he had filled their bellies – frustrated that they couldn't see past their stomachs, not such an easy thing to do when you're starving. Now and then, Jesus could be impatient; you can almost hear it in his voice:

Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that lasts for eternal life.

In their enthusiasm, still thinking of food and comfort, perhaps, they shouted,

"Tell us, what must we do to find this eternal life."

Jesus's answer was simple: believe. Believe in what he was saying. From the Greek *pistis*: to have faith – to put your trust in me. Trust in the truth you see before you to tell you there is more here than meets the eye or your earthly appetites.

Yes. Believe. But when the pain is great and the hunger is bone crushing, it takes time. It takes time to work through such things. Time and one another...

Mary Oliver, again:

You knew what you had to do,
Though the wind pried
With its stiff fingers

At the very foundations,
Though their melancholy
Was terrible.
It was already late
Enough, and a wild night,
And the road full of fallen
Branches and stones.

But little by little,
As you left their voices behind,
The stars began to burn
Through the sheets of the clouds
And there was a new voice
Which you slowly
Recognized as your own.

My own voice, I have come to find, is really not mine. Well, let me rephrase that, when my voice is at its best, its really not mine. It comes from a place that is beyond what I know. All I have to do is believe that place is there and be open to it. It is the voice that speaks through communities like this and others. It is the “Namasthe,” the ancient Aramaic greeting that means “The Spirit in me greets the Spirit in you.” It is a voice that is greater than my own and softer than my own.

I know this voice. It has never called me into isolation, selfishness, or distancing myself from God. On the contrary, it has fought against those things in my own nature, leading me to be with others, finding ways to be of service, reaching out in my own discomfort to help others in theirs.

It is the voice that leads to action that, that over time, leads to healing...and to a greater awareness of God all around me.

It is the Namasthe and the voice of Jesus saying: “pisteuo” (pist-yoo-o) trust in me and you will know who sent me. Don’t tangle me up with all sorts of confusing rules and regulations, trust in me, however you find me, and take care of one another, and you will know I Am.

Over time, I have learned that there is enough God in this universe to go around – and that God has brought us here into this partnership of mission at Jan Hus: a place of healing, joy, celebration, outreach, and challenge. We not only believe, but believe we are guided, that what we do is not of our own doing.

As I begin my time with you and those to come at Jan Hus Presbyterian Church, I want you to know how very happy I am to be here. And, I want to make a promise:

I promise you that I don't have all the answers, but that we will share in each others lives, the joys, the sadness, and all in between. In that journey together, we will continue to find God's will and call for us – from this sanctuary into the City and beyond, just as you have always done.

Jesus said,

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.

He might have said:

You are the bread of my life and the source of nourishment for others. Believe in me and those you serve will never be hungry or thirsty again, for they, too, will know me through you.

Once again, Mary Oliver, as the poem comes to a close:

But little by little
As you left their voices behind,
The stars began to burn
Through the sheets of clouds
And there was a new voice
Which you slowly
Recognized as your own
That kept you company
As you strode deeper and deeper
Into the world
Determined to do the only thing you could do
Determined to save
The only life you could save.

Come. Eat and Drink at this table, for all are welcome Find peace and nourishment here. Let us mend our lives together, for all those who will come our way. And let us find God as we know God in all the things we do.

One day you finally knew...is here and now.

Amen.