

Opening Words

Next Time by Mary Oliver

Next time what I'd do is look at
the earth before saying anything. I'd stop
just before going into a house
and be an emperor for a minute
and listen better to the wind
or to the air being still.

When anyone talked to me, whether
blame or praise or just passing time,
I'd watch the face, how the mouth
has to work, and see any strain, any
sign of what lifted the voice.

And for all, I'd know more -- the earth
bracing itself and soaring, the air
finding every leaf and feather over
forest and water, and for every person
the body glowing inside the clothes
like a light.

It's true, we come here this morning with all of life, our lives, on our minds. It's an independent sort of focus, for each of us brings what we bring of our own.

We come here, though, too, with a shared collection – sometimes it feels like an automatic event: Sunday, 11, church. But there is nothing automatic, once here. It becomes a place of mystery, as soon as our mysterious selves gather and multiply. We connect in a public display of worship and we become the mystery of God in this world.

Our shared collection includes the earth's upheaval in Haiti; earth being earth – driven by no demons, just the planet being planet. We see how human lives and the depths of earth leave us in the sadness and chaos of sisters and brothers broken and struggling – but not forgotten or lost – they are with us this morning.

As we enter into worship and mystery, on this planet, with the shared collection and private thoughts, as well, let us see the glowing light in each of us that never is extinguished, for it comes from a time long before we were – and will continue long after we have left these clothes.

Let the Light of God guide us this day and always.

First Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. You know that when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak. Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says "Let Jesus be cursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Gospel Reading: John 2:1-11

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come" His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Sermon: 351 E. 74th Street; and Intersection in the Universe
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There's a story about a car speeding at a really high rate of speed down the stretch of a long country highway. Oblivious to anything but the sound of engine and rush of air, it is too late when the driver realizes that they've passed a motorcycle cop on patrol. With that sinking feeling that any of us who have ever been stopped for a traffic violation know all too well, the driver looks in the rear view mirror expecting to see flashing light gaining ground.

Instead only a cloud of dust is back in the distance where the police officer had been passed. Concerned for the officer, even in the face of being cited, the driver turns around and travels back, only to find the motorcycle spinning on the side of the road and the police officer dazed, but otherwise unharmed and dusting himself off.

The driver of the speeding car looks at the officer and says, "Are you ok? What happened?"

The police officer says, "What happened? What happened?? I'll tell you what happened. You went by me so fast I thought my motorcycle had stopped and got off to see what was wrong with it!

I think, I know, that sometimes I've been that one traveling too fast, missing the signs, blowing through intersections, often to the chagrin or confusion of others from time to time. I've always tried to go fast. I've just not always been sure of where I was going "fast to"!

Actually, I guess that I have always seen "intersections" as places we pass through. Usually, for me, they've been about some decision or another.

I can remember traveling through Europe for three weeks in the late eighties. I was sitting at an outdoor café in Brussels at the Metropole Hotel. I had been in the middle of a vacation, getting away from a business that I was leaving, trying to decide whether to go off into another business venture or return to school to earn a masters so I could begin teaching. I was 37. At that table, I decided that I wanted to teach. Actually, what I decided was that I didn't want to die without having been a teacher.

From that table at the Metropole, I made a right or a left, not sure which it was, out of the intersection and off to teaching I went – and on to a nearly 20 year career in education.

I passed through that intersection, just as I did in my early-fifties when I decided that I would enter seminary. With almost the same rationale, I began a five year process of night school in conjunction with full-time teaching. Finally, the time came where I appeared for my examination before presbytery to be cleared to seek a call. As a gay man, I had long before decided that I would not abide by G-6.0106b, the amendment that is used to prevent people who are LGBT from

being ordained. As I stood ready for the questions, prayer had brought me to a place where I knew that the examination was not about me, but about those who were soon to vote on whether to clear me to seek a call. I was again in an intersection and whatever path opened would be fine, since my work, to that point, had been done. The rest was, as it always is, in the hands of God.

So, intersections have been these places and times for me of “passage” and “redirection.” That is, anyway, until I arrived here at Jan Hus. It has been here that God began to teach me something about intersections and something about the cross that I didn’t expect.

I approached today’s reading of St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, as I usually do, directly. I read it several times, connected with the familiarity I had had with the passage from before, and began reflecting and reading; reading and reflecting using different texts and events from the present to listen to what was forming.

Clearly, any readings on this day, are like those that have followed other human tragic events on the past – they take on more intensity, looking for meaning, comfort, guidance, and more... to better handle the events, in this case the devastation of human life and property in Haiti.

I don’t politicize the pulpit too often. In fact, I try not to do it at all. I don’t know enough to use the power of the pulpit to influence or tell people what to do or how they should think. I try rather to be provocative, stirring folks to consideration, prayer, conversation...and let the spirit do the rest.

However, when the earthquake struck on Tuesday, many things went through my mind, one being 9/11. In some ways it was a baseline to remind me of our faith and resilience. It was a reminder that we could pull together and make it through. And so I knew and I know that the people of Haiti will make it through and we will be there to help with all the many gifts we share.

Then, I also remembered how, following 9/11, we had the chance – the amazing opportunity to come together as a world. Of the nearly 200 independent countries in the world, probably 90% were by our side following the attack, looking to the U.S.A. for world leadership in response to the attack. We had a chance to take a different path in that intersection; actually, we had the choice to stay in the intersection and with the worldwide support that had come to our side – we had the chance to create a new order.

Instead, we blew through the intersection and down the old trodden path that led us to the place of war that continues to consume young lives, families, nations, human resources, and a sense that the world is primarily a place of conflict. In my opinion, we needed to stay in the intersection and welcome all and the roads they traveled to be with us – and we with them. And together heal and lead.

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians is all about this community in this “newly being ordered” world based on the teachings of Jesus and Jesus as God. A world of

healing and leading. Paul is going to great lengths to acknowledge that every gift is a gift of the spirit – of grace – and all are needed. All form community.

Paul was a tent-maker. His gifts as a tent-maker were every bit as important as his gifts in writing and evangelizing, since both were given him by God for specific purposes. He knew what I had to learn, that you take yourself with you, all of you, regardless of the turns or paths you take in life or the places at which you ultimately stand. And, all the gifts will be used in the ways God calls us to use them. And eventually, we all stand...

Once more, we are in an intersection, the island nation of Haiti. With 1/3 of its population of 9 million displaced, homeless and a death toll expected to exceed 200,000 people – we need to look at this intersection, not as a place to pass through but as a destination of nations and their gifts, prayers, resources, and commitment to remain as long as needed and then some.

The ridiculous break with reality of those who attribute such disasters to demons and devils and pacts need to be ignored, dismissed, and if necessary countered. Planets behave like planets. That simple. The question now is how will we behave as sisters and brothers in the Love of God and all the ways we know God?

Haiti has shifted all of us to one degree or another, as it should. However, now this poorest of nations in the Western Hemisphere offers this world the greatest promise for brotherhood and sisterhood that we have seen in many years. We have the chance to be the best of whom we are in this new cathedral that stands in the combined hearts of those on broken ground. Yes, I am. I am saying that Haiti is a church, all of it, and I am saying that all of this work – however it is being done is worship.

And I know that in a way I did not know before, because I am here.

I imagine some here grew up as I did. Sunday church was something of an event, in itself. There was the early rising, getting ready, getting to church on time, finding seats, crowded and full, service in Latin and then English, and filled with wonder, in many ways. We went to church, had some contact with the church during the week, but pretty much fulfilled our responsibilities one day a week in a packed house.

Those memories are mine. When I started attending Presbyterian Church at South Church in Dobbs Ferry, many years had passed. Still, the experience was much the same in terms of worship. While the seats were not filled, there were eighty or ninety people there on a regular basis, choirs, committees, and so forth. And while there were many activities during the week, Sunday was still the focal point of the congregation.

When I served as interim at Palisades Presbyterian Church in Palisades, NY the congregation was smaller, maybe forty people on a Sunday, but packed with programs and events. Still. Sunday was the day.

From time to time, I hear some laments about the number of people who attend worship. There is discussion about increasing the congregation, growing, and attracting more people. I actually believe that is happening and that a year from now more people will be attracted to this space for worship and even to this congregation as members. In the meantime, please, invite friends to join us and see what we are about. All efforts in growing our congregation are welcome.

However, I have also come to realize that we are not at an intersection in the life of this church seeking to grow – we are the intersection in the call we have been given to serve with all the gifts we have been given. We are not just Sunday worship – we are worship - period.

It's natural to think of moving to what's next and new and needed. We do that all the time. But sometimes we go too fast in our projections about where we should be, leaving motorcycle wheels spinning and police officers dusting themselves off.

Sometimes we recognize that we are being buffeted by certain events and we are inclined to move down the same path we've taken before when the winds have been strong – and we move away from where we are supposed to be – this time around (maybe even the last time around).

As the formidableness of the challenge increases, we seek the quick answers for many reasons, including wanting to help those in need, diminish the pain others may be feeling, and get back to our own lives and the tempo of those lives.

So much of our reaction is based on past experiences. Yet, we have been given gifts and called into this intersection to serve those who travel to us. And, sometimes that means we are going to be a bit different than what we have been accustomed to.

For a while, I have been saying that Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House is an highly specialized ministry. We are not the memory some of us have of former churches. This worship, right here, is the center of the life of this congregation and because of that – everything we do from here is worship.

When we pray here, we worship.

When Essie prepares the candles, we worship.

When Stan and José prepare the sanctuary, we worship.

When we open the doors on Monday, we worship.

When we hand someone a day or week's supply of food, hand out a garment, and welcome all, we worship.

And, every building user, every person who passes through here for twelve-step programs of the gifts of the Carter Burden Center or Pre-Schools, all of these are worship and all of these are members of our congregation – if we see ourselves in this way.

We have a tradition we follow. We have a language of faith that we use. We know God in many of the same ways. We strive to practice the teachings of Jesus. That's who we are. And we welcome all. They don't need to change into anything or even share our beliefs, they are welcome as they have been created and in all the ways they know God. Truly, it's not about what they believe – but about what we believe and what we do based on those beliefs. And, every act based on those beliefs in serving others is worship and prayer.

In some ways, our congregation has worship seven days a week and numbers in the many hundreds. That's our intersection – and in this place with the gifts we have to share, we travel the universe – right to the heart of Port au Prince and other places, seeing that it's not about turning this way or that, but about being present with God and one another.

However the story of Cana actually unfolded, and there are many interpretations, the one thing that strikes me is the confidence Mary had in Jesus, knowing him as she did and knowing that he would take care of things.

Let us hold that same confidence in God, Jesus, Spirit and any other ways you may know God. Let us hold that confidence and know that the intersection between this world and the next has been breached by the cross and we now travel beyond space and time, wherever we gather.

Yes, 351 E 74th Street is an intersection of the universe – and we're staying put in that intersection, welcoming all the paths and those who travel them – as we pray without ceasing and worship always.