

**"Godsmacked by the Images of an Unseen Universe,
But Have We Noticed the Dandelions?"**

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

24 July 2022

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Text: Luke 12:22-31

"Consider the lilies, 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."

~ Luke 12:27

Prayer

Spirit of the Living God,

Fall afresh on us this morning

As we listen to your Word proclaimed.

In Christ and through Christ, we pray. Amen.

The sixth-century Irish monk St. Columbanus, who founded Christian communities throughout Europe, once said, ***"If you wish to know the Creator, come to know his creatures."***¹ There are, of course, many ways to interpret this bit of timeless wisdom. As it is with the message of other Christian sages, the teachings that St. Columbanus passed on to the Church are more like a "moving target" that invites us to a lifelong pursuit of what it means to love God rather than a trite and un-stirring religious aphorism.

Canadian theologian John Philip Newell, a world-renowned teacher of Celtic spirituality, believes that at the root of St. Columbanus' words lies a heart-transforming and mind-expanding spiritual summons to all Christians. To know the Maker of life, we have to train our eyes to look at every star in the sky, every raven, every lily in the field, every blade of grass, every rock, every brook, and all human beings as living icons; in other words, as sacred windows that allow us to catch a glimpse of the Divine Presence in the world around us. It is as if St. Columbanus had a hunch that to know the breadth of God's holiness, the beauty of God's goodness and the true essence of God's life-giving love, humankind would need more than what words can express, sermons may convey, and doctrines teach; we would have to learn, in the words of British poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, to see that the ***"Earth's crammed with heaven and every common bush afire with God."***²

When I was introduced to Mary Oliver, undoubtedly one of America's finest and most beloved poets, what struck me first about her poetry is how easily the reader can relate to her poems. Oliver wrote about the profound sacredness of nature and our humanity in words anyone can understand and appreciate. You don't need the Oxford dictionary or any of the 13 massive books that make up the "Church Dogmatics" written by the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth to grasp the spiritual depth of Mary Oliver's

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

experience of the Divine in the natural world. The language Oliver uses in her poems is very simple, concise, clear and beautiful, and yet they do carry in them the power to awaken people to what we all know in the depths of our being, which is that ***“It is a serious thing just to be alive... in this broken world,”***³ and ***“To pay attention, this is our endless and proper work,”***⁴ because ***“Each of us is given only so many mornings to do it – to look around and love the oily fur of our lives,”***⁵ to make loving the world the work of our lives⁶ and to believe that right beneath the surface of everything in our world lies a great mystery and power that can save our lives.⁷

Mary Oliver once said in an interview with Krista Tippett on *“On Being”* that she got saved by the beauty of the world.⁸ What I think she meant is that she was able to see ***“in the family of things,”***⁹ in wild geese, in the rain, in a summer day, in ice, in daisies and crickets, among the trees, and in life a ***“door to the Temple,”***¹⁰ a tiny opening into the awe-inspiring grace of God that fills the Earth. In one of her essays published in the book *“Upstream,”* Oliver wrote: ***“Knowledge has entertained me and it has shaped me and it has failed me. Something in me still starves. In what is probably the most serious inquiry of my life, I have begun to look past reason, past the provable, in other directions. Now I think there is only one subject worth my attention and that is the precognition of the spiritual side of the world and, within this recognition, the condition of my own spiritual state... What I mean by spirituality is not theology, but attitude. Such interest nourishes me beyond the finest compendium of facts.”***¹¹

For too long, Christians have been taught, instructed and even impelled to seek a certain knowledge of God that excludes that spiritual side of creation that Mary Oliver celebrated and embraced in her writings and in her life. Our services, music, doctrines, prayers and theologies often concentrate on the human soul, the human heart, on our sinful nature, the human longing for meaning and on the human need for salvation. The entire non-human world – the world of forests and deserts, oceans and rivers, fish and reptiles, flowers and seeds, large mammals and tiny insects – the world of biodiversity and unique ecosystems that is crucial to our own survival seems completely irrelevant to our knowledge of God, to our very physical and spiritual salvation. The Church has been so obsessed with humanity that our theology and religious practices have made us indifferent to the generosity and love of the Creator that nature reveals minute after minute, second after second. Our religion is too anthropocentric and, because of our obsession with ourselves, we have forgotten that the earth is overflowing with God’s love for life and that we are part of the beautiful, diverse and sacred family of things on our planet.

It is telling that while speaking about God’s providential care, Jesus told his disciples to pay attention not to what goes on inside religious buildings but to the natural world. ***“Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them.” “Look at the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet... even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.”*** This is the Gospel! Jesus’ words are simple, beautiful, precise and life-saving.

Early on in my own ministry I learned quickly that the knowledge of God Christ entrusted to us is seldom about the impregnable and arcane theological teachings of the institutional Church but is mostly about learning to see God through the simple things that open our hearts to fresh awareness of God in us, with us and all around us. And of all things it was a church lawn peppered with dandelions that taught me to be alert to the visibility of the invisible God in the midst of life.

But before I tell you about the dandelions in the church lawn, I have to say a few words about Pedro – the kind, talkative, thoughtful, high-spirited and inquisitive middle-aged man the church I was serving hired to be our custodian. Pedro grew up in Costa Rica but due to a learning disability, he was unable to finish even elementary school. Later in life, Pedro immigrated to the United States, got married and settled in Chicago. He could not read or write very well in either Spanish or English, so he scraped a living working at all sorts of odd jobs until he got the job at the church.

Pedro loved working at the church and often did more than was expected of him. On Sunday mornings, he was always the first person in the building regardless of the weather. He took great pleasure and pride in setting up the fellowship hall for coffee hour, making sure the sanctuary was ready for worship, never too hot, never too cold, and he always stood by the front doors every Sunday morning to greet the church members with a beautiful smile. The only thing that really seemed to upset Pedro beyond words were the dandelions in the church lawn. He made it his mission to turn the church lawn into the perfect “American lawn”, but the dandelions kept showing up every spring, frustrating his obsessive quest for a flawless green grass. Every year, Pedro pulled them up, sprayed them with weed killers, dug their roots up, and ran over them with the lawn mower. He got annoyed at me for not being bothered by the sight of the dandelions. Once I told him that I actually enjoyed seeing the grass covered with little yellow flowers and, for the first time ever, Pedro was visibly mad at me. He was very proud to be an American citizen and Pedro told me I had not really learned to be a real, red-blooded American at heart because being an American means loving a perfect lawn. And that is how the dandelions became an issue in my ministry. Every spring, much to Pedro’s dislike, the little yellow flowers showed up in the church lawn.

Without dismissing Pedro’s frustration or longing for a flawless lawn, I have to say that I began to be thankful for the defiance of the dandelions. They simply would not just go away. Each time Pedro thought he had finally gotten rid of them all, the little yellow flowers would find inconspicuous places closer to the church building to show up. They appeared suddenly between the cracks of the walkway in front of the church. They blossomed quietly right in the middle of the grass where no one expected them to spring up again. And then, as if teasing Pedro, the little flowers would turn into fuzzy white puffballs that the children arriving at the church on Sunday morning could not resist plucking out and playfully blowing at them, mindlessly helping to spread their seeds all over the lawn. I confess that when no one was watching, I would blow the dandelions’ puffballs myself because their yellow presence each spring had become a kind of spiritual

reminder to me that my faith ought to be less like a perfect lawn and a little more like the dandelions. The yellow flowers in the church lawn became a kind of parable that, each spring, spoke to me that God comes to us, much like the dandelions do, and persistently nudges us to blossom, shows us the possibility for new life, gently encourages us to grow even in difficult places, graciously gives us new opportunities to be alive, even joyful, and consistently calls on us to spread seeds of hope, love, faith, kindness, gratitude and laughter in every direction. Those little yellow flowers changed my attitude toward what I thought I knew about beauty and perfection. Every time I see a dandelion, I thank God for the way life in all its glory and messiness still persists on Earth despite humanity's best efforts to control, dominate, tame, exploit, use, and even eliminate it.

To this day, one of my favorite poems is entitled "*In Defense of Dandelions*," written by the now deceased United Church of Christ minister Van Parker. Listen to Parker's words:

***"If there is such a thing as
re-incarnation,
I would like to take
a brief turn
as a dandelion.***

***This free-spirited flower
Has no respect for
Boundaries, seeding itself
Indiscriminately
In lawns and fields***

***And in between cracks
In the sidewalk.
Efforts to get rid of it
Show no signs of
Long-term success***

***As the very next year,
In April or May,
There they are,
All those dandelions
With that bright
Yellow smile***

***Saying, "Aren't you happy
To see us again!"¹²***

Two weeks ago, the whole of humankind was transfixed by the breathtaking images of the universe the James Webb Space Telescope captured. Scientists who are analyzing

the data say that in those photos, humanity may be seeing for the first time a galaxy that existed more than 13 billion years ago and only 300 million years after the Big Bang. Marcelo Gleiser, a Brazilian professor of physics and astronomy at Dartmouth College who, in 2019, was awarded the Templeton Prize for his work on science as a spiritual quest to understand the origins of the universe and life on Earth, said that the new photos of the universe have ushered astronomy into a whole new phase. Humans can begin to link the very early time after the Big Bang to our own existence. We can start connecting the history of our tiny little blue planet to the wider and ever-expanding cosmic history of the universe. ***“Scientists can look back at the first stars, those earliest agglomerations of hydrogen that churned up all chemicals that made up planets and living creatures.”*** We know that all of us and everything on Earth are made of that star stuff and now we may find out more about our beginnings and, perhaps, about other planets and life forms. Prof. Gleiser said, ***“This is quite a milestone, and none too shabby for primates with enlarged brains that only 20,000 years ago were hunting and gathering to survive.”***¹³

You and I are living in exciting times in more than one way. It is an amazing scientific achievement to begin to measure the real astronomical vastness of our universe and seek to understand the stupendously great forces that created galaxies and planets like ours that sustain an incredibly rich biodiversity. But as I looked at the never-before-seen pictures of the universe on my computer, I couldn't help but think about the tiny little dandelions in the church lawn. I wondered if they would keep on showing up to brighten up our little corner of the universe, inviting other pastors to see in their persistent bright yellow smile something of the wideness of God's heart or if the rising global temperatures might accomplish what Pedro could not do. I wondered if the ravens might still find the food God intended for them on a hotter planet where scientific knowledge does not always translate into the political will to slow down global warming.

Non-human life on Earth matters and it's time that Christians accept that we cannot know God if we do not change our attitude toward the urgent imperative to see ourselves as part of the family of things in this world. The Church cannot be silent or keep preaching about salvation in the afterlife while species are pushed to the brink of extinction, ecosystems are collapsing, excessive heat is endangering the existence of the very wildflowers Jesus once saw as signs of God's loving care, and economic interests of nations rob other creatures of their natural habitat. We can't pretend that we will reverse global warming one electric vehicle at a time. Humankind will not do enough to preserve the beautiful diversity and variety of life on Earth if our knowledge of the universe does not deepen our individual and collective appreciation for the only planet we know can support life. The salvation the Church proclaims can no longer exclude non-human life. We have to change our attitude, our language, our theology, our politics, and our choices to control our impulse to make the Earth perfect for humanity to the detriment of the diversity, variety and beauty of life right here on the planet that we believe God has entrusted to our care.

Friends, it is not enough to try to understand and appreciate the mystery of human origin and life on Earth only with our brains. We need to pay attention to the spiritual side of the world that can inspire the Church to hold life, every life, as sacred. On this unusually hot summer day, I encourage you to take some time to remember the people, the simple things, the flowers, the animals, the ponds around you that awaken your soul, heart and mind to the sacredness of life on Earth. Stop for a moment today, find a quiet place, close your eyes and think of those moments when the natural world drew you closer to the Creator and may have saved your life. Take some time to consider the dandelions. They have a spiritual lesson for us. Every year, they show up again to remind us that perfect lawns are not good for the environment and that God's loving care is boundless. Imagine our congregation like the dandelion's puffball ready to spread the seeds of a simple, clear, easy-to-understand spirituality that brings people closer to God by inspiring them to take life on Earth seriously. Try to picture all of us like a smiling dandelion, showing up again and again in places we are not expected or wanted but where our faith, our voices, our votes and our presence can change people's and politicians' attitudes about the sacredness of the natural world. Imagine, just imagine us, you and me, inviting people to know God by loving and protecting God's creation. Imagine all of us doing what we can to make sure there will always be ravens and lilies on our planet and every spring, dandelions will still pop up everywhere to say to the world and the universe: hello, aren't you happy to see us again!

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Quote by J. Philip Newell in The Book of Creation, p. 68.

² Elizabeth Barrett Browning in Aurora Leigh, p. 595.

³ Mary Oliver in Devotions, Invitation, pp. 107-108 [Kindle Edition].

⁴ Mary Oliver in New and Selected Poems, Vol. Two, Yes! No!, p.151.

⁵ Mary Oliver in House of Light, The Deer, p. 24 [Kindle Edition].

⁶ Mary Oliver in Thirst, Messenger, p. 1.

⁷ Mary Oliver in Devotions, Invitation, p. 123 [Kindle Edition].

⁸ On Being with Krista Tippett – Mary Oliver in "I got saved by the beauty of the world," aired on 5 February 2015 [<https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-oliver-i-got-saved-by-the-beauty-of-the-world/>].

⁹ Mary Oliver in New and Selected Poems, Vol. One, Wild Geese, p. 110.

¹⁰ Mary Oliver in Upstream, p.154.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 153.

¹² Van Parker in Opening Doors, In Defense of Dandelions, p. 6.

¹³ By Marcelo Gleiser in James Webb Space Telescope launches astronomy into a new era, BIGTHINK, 13.8 – 13 July 2022 [https://bigthink.com/13-8/james-webb-space-telescope-astronomy-new-era/?fbclid=IwAR35xjFOVFs_vjNgtpQP02pruif9x798dOueo_ARU89FHG5BS0GoKchJUnw].