

## The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany

Texts: Isaiah 6:1-13; I Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

### The Summer Day by Mary Oliver

Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper I mean—  
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and  
down—  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her  
face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?

---

I want to talk with you today about ministry. I am fully aware that even by using that word—in spite of the fact that we put on the top of our bulletins each week that *all of us* are the ministers here by virtue of our baptism—that many of you will “check out” as soon as you hear that word.

Somewhere along the line too many of us were taught that “ministry” (as well as “calling” and “vocation”) are church words. We think of the guys up front—in the pulpit or at the altar—wearing the funny clothes. Maybe we even think of those who read the lessons or hold the chalice or light the candles or hand out the bulletins or clean up the dishes. But the point is that we tend to focus on what happens here—in this building.

But what happens to us when we begin to think about ministry as what each of us chooses to do “with our one wild and precious life?” What happens when we begin to focus on our work in the world? After all, Jesus encounters these fishermen on the job...not in church!

Here, too, I am in danger of losing some of you. Work in the world may well mean the job we get paid to do. We are fortunate if we draw a salary for the work we consider to be our ministry—that is work which uses our God-given talents to bring the Reign of God closer. But I mean more than that. Some of us are in jobs that put food on the table and little more. It is a part of our realities. But I am thinking also of all those in this congregation who coach sports teams or volunteer on town committees or the PTA. I mean being a faithful parent or grandparent or godparent or aunt or uncle. I mean going to see your friend in the hospital to hold their hand even when it may well make you uncomfortable. I mean, in short, all that you are doing, from day to day, with your one, wild, and precious life.

Some of us have been taught that the Bible is a book of rules—that it is meant primarily to keep us in line. There is some of that to be sure. But the Bible is first and foremost a story book—a narrative. It's about people much more like us than we tend to realize, about people who struggle with their faith and with God, people who struggle with their neighbors. These stories invite us into a community and even more specifically into a conversation that is endlessly new. Sometimes in a conversation there is more than one truth.

So I think we are meant to see that both Isaiah and today's gospel reading convey truth as they reflect on ministry. The first eight verses of the reading from Isaiah may well be familiar to us. We hear them as exciting and energizing—we hear them as a way of responding with courage to one's call. "Here I am, Lord...send me." As Frederick Beuchner has put it, this text is about finding where our deep joy intersects with the world's needs.

But the text doesn't end there. In fact, by all accounts, Isaiah "failed" if our measure of "success" is that of the world. Isaiah said "look" and people insisted, "we see nothing." He said "listen" and people said, "we can't hear a thing." Sometimes ministry is like that. Sometimes it's like that in ordained ministry—in the church. But also in the world. I think of the intelligence officer who tries to speak the truth to a politician...but it falls on deaf ears. I think of the politician who knows what he needs to do, but acting in that way will cost him with the special interests and he may well lose the next election. I think of the teacher who wants to teach, but is required to coach on how to pass the MCAS. I think of the doctor who wishes to heal, but must deal with the HMOs. Sometimes ministry is frustrating and hard. This isn't an Old Testament idea; it's simply a reality. If we mean to do the work God gives us to do with integrity, with honesty, with truthfulness—well we will not always be successful by the world's standards. We are called, however, not to success but fidelity.

The gospel gives us the other end. To align ourselves with Jesus and the values of God's reign is to put ourselves into an alternative reality—a world not of scarcity but of abundance. Amazing things can and do happen if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. The nets are put out and the fish find their way in. The bread is broken and blessed and all are satisfied and there is more than enough. The pledge cards go out

and the people respond with glad and generous hearts and there is more than enough to do the work. You take a job because your heart tells you it is right and doors begin to open that lead to new possibilities you could not previously imagine.

This is not a quid pro quo, however. There are no guarantees and we cannot manipulate the outcome. It's a mystery and ministry is both/and, not either/or. It is great when the nets are not overflowing but we must not think we have failed when they are not.

The message is the thing—and here is where Paul and today's epistle are of great help to us. They remind us that we proclaim Jesus Christ—that we follow Jesus Christ. The road is a winding one that leads by way of the cross, but toward Easter morning and the promise of new life. Our eyes and ears are on Jesus—and if that is the message then whether we find ourselves with Isaiah or Peter we can continue to press on.

What are you doing with your one, wild and precious life?

Finally, we may well be tempted to think this is a one time deal—all or nothing. Maybe that this sermon is addressed to anyone under thirty, anyone who has time to make a choice about what they will do, what school they will go to or what they will major in or what career they will choose. For the rest of us it may be too late, we think...we've made our choices, we are now stuck with them.

I received my newsletter this week from the Society of St. John the Evangelist, a community with which I affiliate as a part of the Fellowship of St. John. In that newsletter is an article by one of the brothers, Paul Wessinger. He is writing about intercessory prayer and then he says that it has become more important to him for two reasons: his age (and the loss of mobility that has accompanied the aging process for him) and his severe hearing loss. He feels increasingly isolated because of these disabilities from ministries that used to sustain him. Yet he is discovering a renewed commitment to intercessory prayer—that he can take an active part in this ministry even now, and maybe especially now.

God isn't finished with any of us yet—not with a monk in his eighties and not with any of us. Always God is at work, giving us new gifts and insights, and prodding us to use them in all we do.

So, what are you doing with your own, wild and precious life?

© The Rev. Dr. Richard M. Simpson  
February 4, 2007  
Holden, MA