

Steve Jungkeit
The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme
Text: Genesis 11: 1-9; I Corinthians 12: 7-14
January 30, 2022

A Faithfully Hidden Life: Snowy Reflections upon *Middlemarch*

I had us read that familiar parable that Jesus told about the sower and the seed that was scattered because much of what I wish to share this morning can be understood as a kind of commentary upon that parable. Keep it in mind as I string this necklace of thoughts together.

Winters, during this long stretch of Covid, are for reading. They're good for plugging the holes in one's literary exposure, or for revisiting books that made an impression years before. Or so it's been for me. Last year I used winter to go through three massive novels, each of which I had read before – *War and Peace*, *Les Misérables*, and *Don Quixote*. A book a month for January, February, and March. There are some charming things about winter – a snowstorm is one of them – but I have to confess that on the whole I don't love this season. But last year's big winter Covid reads made me love it a little more. So this year I chose to do the same thing all over again, only with some different novels this time. January was devoted to *Middlemarch* – I just finished the novel a few days ago, and I can recommend it highly. February shall be *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens' last novel. March shall be *Pere Goriot*, from Balzac, and perhaps another of his novels, since that one is considerably shorter than the others. If you want to read along, let me know!

I think of it all as a response to that great scene in Augustine's Confessions, when he hears a voice, which he interprets as the voice of God, saying to him, "tolle lege, tolle lege," which means, "take and read." We have these beautiful, incredible, testimonies of human life that have been inscribed and preserved for us. They're deposits of wisdom, written as if to each of us. They're seeds, scattered by ages past, and our lives are the soil in which those seeds either grow, or become strangled and choked. Or, to shift the metaphor once again, we can think of them as hands extended from the past, which we can reach for, joining our hands to theirs in a great chain of human understanding. More about that in a bit.

I worry that fewer and fewer people seem willing, to say nothing of capable, of receiving the invitation that Augustine responded to – take and read. That means that the seeds can't grow, and the hands between past and present aren't clasped at all. As we confront the emergence of a new authoritarian (some say fascist) spirit in our country and throughout the world, I actually believe that reading is one of the tools we have for preserving our critical faculties. It's noteworthy that in 1984, Orwell imagines a future in which books are burned. But in Huxley's *Brave New World* we confront a reality far closer to our own – where books don't need to be burned, because everyone's too distracted to bother reading them. That's my public service announcement for the day, in the spirit of St. Augustine: take and read. Let the seeds grow. Take the outstretched hands and clasp them.

Yesterday's storm was an opportunity to pivot from what I intended to talk about and to pare things down just a little bit. And I thought I'd do that by sharing just one of the important themes that circulates through *Middlemarch*, which simply has to do with leading a quiet and decent life, while trying one's best to be useful to those around us. It's a novel set in a small town – Middlemarch – set some distance from London, that actually reminded me quite a bit of our own town, and region. It's a novel that Virginia Woolf said was one of a few English novels

written for grownups. That's because it isn't divided between good and evil characters, or heroes and villains. Except in rare cases, most people don't fit either of those categories especially well. Instead, it's filled with individuals who look and feel a lot like most of the people I know, including myself – not always fully self-aware, and making choices that can sometimes be for the good, but that other times can be quite messy, though not usually because of malign intent. Mostly, people are doing their best, even if they make compromises that lead to unavoidable and unforeseen consequences.

Dorothea Brooke is one of those characters. The novel begins and ends with Dorothea, but it frames her by referencing a saint. At the very beginning of the book, the narrator writes of a young Teresa of Avila, departing her household with her still younger brother, to go martyr herself in the service of a national ideal. Some family members find them and turn them back. But while Teresa matured and her vision shifted, her devotion to an ideal larger than herself never wavered. She went on to reform a religious order. The difficulty, according to the narrator, is that many Teresas are born into the world, who are filled with noble ideals. But most don't live a storied existence. Most of those Teresas, the narrator argues, are caught between their idealistic desires on one hand, and circumstances that prevent them from achieving any kind of grandeur at all on the other. "Here and there is born a Saint Teresa," George Eliot says, "foundress of nothing, whose loving heartbeats...after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering in some long recognizable deed."

What the book is announcing on its opening page is, in effect, that this will not be War and Peace. It's not a book about people swept up into the great events of world history, in which their courage or cowardice are tested. It shall be a story about a provincial country town in which the forces of history enter only tangentially, and where the action of the novel shall unfold in the minute, sometimes microscopically tiny decisions by which human lives come to flourish, or flounder. One of my favorite moments in the book communicates that microscopic scale beautifully. In it, a man struggling with both his health and the frustration of his life ambitions remains rigid while his wife places her hand on his arm in a gesture of comfort and shared support. But the man stands in what Eliot calls, "an unresponsive hardness." And then she adds these wonderful words: "It is in these acts, called trivialities, that the seeds of joy are forever wasted, until men and women look round with haggard faces at the devastation their own waste has made, and say, the earth bears no harvest of sweetness – calling their denial knowledge." How often have you and I squandered our joy in such ways? No battles are fought. No lives are taken by another. No sweeping adventures take place. Instead, the action takes place in small gestures, where the seeds of a good and meaningful life are either nurtured, or wasted.

In essence, George Eliot seems to be asking, what if nothing huge or earth shattering ever happened to you? Say you never got the big job. Say you never got famous. Say you never made a fortune. Say you didn't fight in a great war or live through a momentous event. Say you made a mistake, that somehow got you stuck in life. Say that outside of your immediate family and a handful of friends, you'll rest in a cemetery with a stone just like all those other stones – mostly unrecognized. Say that, between the grand intentions and dreams of your youth, and the reality of your adult life, there existed an unbridgeable chasm, where the intention and actuality, dream and waking life, never meet? Would your life have been in vain?

Eliot suggests an answer on the final page of the novel, when Teresa of Avila appears once again. No matter the force of our will, no matter how powerfully our candle is lit against the darkness, there is no person whose inner life is not greatly determined by forces outside of them, she suggests. "A new Teresa," Eliot says, "will hardly have the opportunity of reforming a

convent life, any more than a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of a brother's burial: the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is forever gone." Only for a very few, in other words, does the medium of their existence match the ardor of their ideals. Thanks be to God that there are those whose lives and circumstances perfectly match – they're the ones that we call reformers and heroes, the MLKs and the Fannie Lou Hamers, the Lincolns and the St. Teresas. "But we insignificant people," Eliot continues, "with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many (anonymous Teresas)...whose nature will spend itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of such (people) on those around them is incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts..."

That, in turn, brings me around to all of us, gathered in our living rooms on a winter day during a long pandemic. There are times, I suspect, that we're tempted to measure our worth by the ways, to use the argot of the moment, "we're transforming our world." Faith, and our ethical responses to the issues of the day, are often understood to involve what I would call "manly deeds of ethical valor." Our imaginations have been shaped by the very powerful and important stories of faith leaders, or other reformers, who have stood up to the forces of ignorance or intolerance and who have won. They march, they argue, they demonstrate, they go to prison, and sometimes they're martyred. When we don't do those things, we somehow feel as though we're not measuring up, as though our lives, and the ways we live out our faith, are somehow less than that of those great heroes. *Middlemarch* is a feminist intervention in that line of thinking, for while it doesn't discount the need to fight the power, it opens up a different theater of action, where the minute and barely perceptible gestures, like that unyielding and inflexible arm, impervious to tenderness, contains the seed of our flourishing, or our withering.

Here's what I'm trying to tell you: it's tempting to think, in this long season of Covid, that nothing much of substance is happening in our lives. It's tempting to think that we must always be out there "making a difference," "changing the world," "transforming the culture," and so forth. When we're not doing those things, or we're not able to do those things – for whatever reason – restrictions on our movement, shutdowns, the aging process – whatever it is, we tend to feel insufficient. Sometimes we need the grand gestures. But we must not miss a still more powerful truth, which is that each of us, in our smallest gestures and actions, in the ways we invite conversation and ask interested questions of others, in the ways we care for and connect to one another, are actually hard at work building the future already. And it's not only the web of supportive relationships that we build. Let's include as well the ways we spend our money – money is one of the great themes running through the novel after all. I was reminded this week by Mary Tomassetti's video that the things we choose to buy, or not to buy, are important ways of having a positive effect upon others that is incalculably diffusive. Think of money as a kind of language, where each dollar is a word that we utter. We have the capacity, with our consumer choices and with the money we give away, to speak a supportive and compassionate language that, in small but meaningful gestures, are preparing the way for the anonymous St. Teresas who are still to be born.

I'll end by returning to a metaphor I used early on – that of outstretched hands. The deposits of wisdom from the past, such as *Middlemarch*, are hands outstretched to our own. We can take those hands in times of trouble, and our lives will be immeasurably enriched. But don't forget a corollary truth: our hands must extend not only backward, but forward, toward the future, toward those who are yet to come, who will one day reach for our hands in a time of need. The ways we reach toward them will certainly be found in the grandiose gestures we

accomplish as a community of faith. But they'll also be accomplished by the smaller touches, which is to say, by the quiet ways we go about creating lives of understanding and grace – in our words, in our gestures, in the use of our time, and in the language of our money. Those too are ways of extending our hands toward the future. Or, to shift the metaphor one last time, they are ways of sowing good seeds, seeds that in time, and in ways we can scarcely foresee, will grow into inhabitable gardens.