

Steve Jungkeit  
 The First Congregational Church of Old Lyme  
 Texts: Matthew 6: 19-21; Philippians 4: 8-9  
 September 25, 2022

### Days of Bread and Roses

Our business manager shared a story the other day that I thought was worth repeating this morning. He told me about a community up in northern New England that was infested with bats, and because each of the churches in that town had high steeples, the churches were the ones that had the greatest problem. And so the ministers got together to see if they could figure out a solution. The Episcopal minister said that he had tried trapping them all. He drove miles away from town and released them into the wild, but it didn't work. They just found their way back. The Baptist minister said he had tried putting out poison, but that didn't work either. The bats were too smart, and they knew not to eat. A few other ministers shared their tactics, but none of them were effective. The Congregational minister was sitting in the back, and finally he said, "You don't have to worry. I've already taken care of the problem. I told the bats Stewardship Sunday was this week, and I haven't seen them since!"

It is Stewardship Sunday, but thankfully, you didn't respond in the same way those bats did! You came, and from what I can tell, you came cheerfully, which isn't a surprise to me. Still, for the preacher, and for everyone in the pews as well, a Stewardship sermon can be a little predictable. In a way, it's like watching someone with a very large car backing into a very tight parking space. You know that the car - or stewardship in this case - is going to get wedged in there somehow. You know the ending. The fascination, if such it is, comes in observing just how it's all going to fit.

Let me begin by marking out the parking space, if you will. In one of the more familiar of Jesus's parables, he instructs his listeners not to store up for themselves treasures on earth, where rust and the moth destroy, but to store up treasures in heaven. Now, many have understood earth and heaven in that parable to mean this life and the afterlife. On earth, we should live with austerity and restraint for our full reward will be given to us later. Perhaps. We can sense the wisdom of that strategy. It's not unlike what a cautious investment counselor might advise. But I wonder if there's a different way of hearing those words. I'd like to suggest that Jesus's parable be understood not as a commentary upon this world and the next, but rather as an existential metaphor about this world, about how to fortify and strengthen ourselves amidst the struggles we must inevitably confront. Treasures in heaven would then refer to the things we need here, now, if we are to live into our full humanity. Treasures in heaven are the resources we can draw upon when the way becomes difficult, those things in our spiritual backpacks that we can reach for when the things of the earth fail to satisfy us.

I thought about treasures in heaven when I read a book recently about the novelist and essayist George Orwell. It's called *Orwell's Roses*, by one of the writers I admire most in the world, Rebecca Solnit. It's about Orwell, of course, and about how, even when he was combating the worst tendencies of the twentieth century - fascism in Spain, totalitarianism in Soviet Russia, or the grinding poverty of coal miners outside Manchester - he always maintained a beautiful rose garden at home. For Solnit, the roses become something like a treasure in heaven, as I hear that parable, an emblem for all the ways humans depend upon small deposits of sanity and pleasure, especially when we are forced to confront insane, soul-deadening, and

occasionally outrageous things. Far from being frivolous or escapist, the rose, in Solnit's sense, is as necessary to human life as air. It is the treasure in heaven that helps to restore a sense of sanity and balance to the world.

My favorite of the stories Solnit recounts has to do with a campaign for women's voting rights in 1910, a moment that feels suddenly contemporary.<sup>1</sup> It was a full decade before women's suffrage was enshrined in the Constitution, and Helen Todd, an organizer for the suffrage movement, was on an automobile journey of southern Illinois. Her objective was to convince those in rural America that voting rights - and also food safety, child labor laws, and workplace safety - were all issues that pertained to ordinary women throughout the country. One night, she was staying with a host family. The host was bedridden, but had insisted that her (in her words) "hired girl," Maggie, go in her stead. She, the host, already believed in women's suffrage, but Maggie, she reasoned, needed to hear more.

At breakfast the following day, Maggie said this: "If you want to know what I liked the best of all in the whole meetin' it was that about the women votin' so's everybody would have bread and flowers too." Something about the phrase leapt out to Helen Todd, who recognized in it the need for life's necessities, and also the need for other things that aren't always understood to be necessary - flowers, which is to say, the experience of beauty. Todd wound up being so taken with the phrase that she sent her host an embroidered pillow that said, "Bread for All, and Roses too."

The phrase caught on. The following year, in 1911, a poet named James Oppenheim published a poem called "Bread and Roses," with the following refrain:

As we come marching, marching, unencumbered women dead  
Go crying through our singing their ancient song of Bread;  
Small art and love and beauty their drudging spirits knew -  
Yes, it is Bread we fight for - but we fight for Roses, too.

Solnit reflects thus: "Bread fed the body, roses fed something subtler: not just hearts, but imaginations, psyches, senses, identities...It was...an argument against the idea that everything that human beings need can be reduced to quantifiable, tangible goods and conditions. Roses in those declarations stood for the way that human beings are complex, desires are irreducible, that what sustains us is often subtle and elusive."<sup>2</sup>

I love the origin story of that phrase, and I love how it went on to be taken up by movements for labor rights, prison reform, and even a contemporary feminist organization in Latin America and Europe called Pan y Rosas. We need bread, but we need so much more if the fullness of our humanity is to be nurtured. We need bread, yes, but we also need art. We need vegetables, true, but we also need music. We need roads, but we also need experiences in nature. We need bread, but - and here's the turn I wish to make - we also need to have our spirits fed. We need roses. We need those places we can go to, within ourselves and within the world around us, where our spirits can be restored and strengthened.

Sunday by Sunday, when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we do say, "Give us this day our daily bread." But I wonder how many of us also recall the words of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, when he makes a similar point to the one that Solnit offers. "People do not live by

---

<sup>1</sup> The following paragraphs are drawn from Rebecca Solnit, *Orwell's Roses*, (New York: Viking Random House, 2022), pgs. 85-89.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, pgs. 86-87.

bread alone,” Jesus says. Only here, instead of roses, he says that we also live “by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” It’s an odd phrase when you think about it, because God speaks a lot of words throughout the pages of the Bible. Which words, exactly, are the ones that we need to complement our daily allotment of bread? We come closer to an answer when we recall that in the Christian tradition, the word of God, properly speaking, isn’t the Bible. The word of God is a person - Jesus of Nazareth, in whom we see God become flesh. That insight allows us to discern a pattern, by which we understand that God continually speaks with words that are written in flesh, in your life now, and mine. Building upon Solnit’s insight, perhaps we can say that the rose we most deeply need and desire beyond our daily bread is discovered in the flesh and blood of another - in a handshake, in an arm around the shoulders, in an embrace, in the meeting of eyes, in the exchange of the spoken word. In the fullest dimension of Christian thought, perhaps that’s what it means to live by every word that comes from the mouth of God. What if we ourselves were that word? Or to put it another way, what if we ourselves were the rose, or the treasures in heaven that someone else might be in search of?

I learned something about that in the summer of 2011, a moment in which I experienced a deep need for roses, and for treasures in heaven. Our family - smaller then by one - spent the summer in Northern Vermont, where I was filling in as a minister for a small congregation while their own minister went on sabbatical. I had just finished a year-long residency as a chaplain at Bridgeport Hospital. A trauma hospital in a low income American city can sometimes seem like a battlefield, and at the end of that year, I was emotionally and spiritually fried. I needed a whole lot more than bread at that point. But there was a lot of other stuff that had drained me too. The year prior to that, I had finished my doctoral work at Yale. And I knew I wanted, and needed, to get out of my head. And so I hurled myself headlong into chaplaincy work. I soon discovered just how vast the distance was between the oak walled classrooms I had become accustomed to, and the moans, and sometimes sobs, of the ER or the burn unit. It was a healthy dose of reality, but it was also disorienting.

But there were other things too. I wasn’t paid an awful lot, it was hard to cover our expenses, I was doing overnights at the hospital, and our girls were young and still needed a lot of attention that I couldn’t offer. Rachael and I began to feel strains in our relationship. And then at one point in the spring, we learned that Rachael was - surprise! - pregnant again.

In hindsight, we can now look back and think, of course we were going to be ok. But in that moment, life didn’t feel ok. We didn’t feel ok. We needed a change of scene. We needed a chance to gather our wits, to breathe, and above all to reconnect with one another. And that little church in Newport, Vermont, offered us just that. They threw us a lifeline - a rose - that we needed. They didn’t do anything in particular, other than simply being themselves. They showed us kindness, and in the shared meals and conversations, in being invited into what were often very tender moments, they helped remind me of what I loved about ministry in the first place. Without even knowing they were doing it, they actually helped Rachael and I to trust that, come what may, we, and our family, had the resources that we needed for the coming year. They helped assure us that we were going to be just fine. And we were.

When I think about what it means to live by every word that comes from the mouth of God, I think about that small community church, and I think about those people. They became, for me, the word of God, not as a command or as an admonition, but as a gentle and restorative set of voices, and bodies, gathered together to, in the words of our benediction, “strengthen the fainthearted, support the weak, and help the suffering.” When I think of treasures stored in heaven, I think of the gifts they gave to me and to Rachael, gifts of faith, and of hope, and of

love, that we continue to carry with us to this day. They didn't know they were giving those things, but they did, just by being the ordinary and faithful people they were.

You do that too, you know, probably more than you realize. You continually do it for me. But for countless others as well, you are the treasure in heaven, helping to restore weary lives. For countless more still, you are a rose, providing something that is both unquantifiable and irreducible in the world, but also something that is as necessary as bread or water.

You are the rose, the treasure, for each of the refugees that have found their way into our little community. When you provide them with a home, and with rides, and with food, and most of all, with friendship, you are the treasure, the rose, the gentle incarnate word spoken in the world. When you line up outside to distribute food for hungry families, or to hand out diapers to struggling parents, or show up to pound nails at Habitat for Humanity, you are the rose, whether you know it or not. When you serve a meal at the Soup Kitchen, you become the rose for someone else. For our global partners - in Haiti and Palestine, in South Africa and South Dakota - this community is a rose, a treasure in heaven, even as those communities have often been a rose for us. We're mutual signs to one another that we have not been forgotten, that we are not isolated, that we have not abandoned one another. That's true as well of countless other local and international organizations that depend upon the goodwill of this community. In our giving, in our sponsorship, and in our support, we become the rose for another. It's also true that every time we speak out for human rights, or for social justice, or simply for ordinary decency in indecent times, we are offering a rose to the world around us. Of course, there are those who can only perceive the thorns in such offerings, but it's a thing of beauty that we're attempting to convey.

But it happens in so many other ways as well. Have you ever considered that just by being here, just by showing up and being exactly who you are, you might be offering a rose to another, who might need it? For our choir, I wonder if you realize that your gift of music might just be the treasure in heaven, the rose, that someone might need at precisely that moment. For those who volunteer to organize our fellowship hours, or for those who plan the meals that I'm pleased to say we can finally have with one another again, or for those who gather to sew and to stitch and to laugh on Mondays - I wonder if you know that you're creating moments in which someone might feel strengthened, or restored. I wonder if all of us realize just how often there may be people, or families, that we encounter who are in the very same position I was in when I went to Northern Vermont. Just by being the ordinary, and faithful, people that you are, you might be throwing someone a lifeline, a rose, a treasure stored up in heaven. You might be the incarnate word formed upon the very lips of God.

What I'm saying is that the life of faith matters, maybe more than any of us realizes from moment to moment. And this place, the work of this community, matters more than any of us consciously understands from Sunday to Sunday. I believe it's a place that's worthy of our time, and of our financial resources too. And now at last we back all the way into that parking space: I hope you'll give generously to our Stewardship campaign this year. Your gifts help to ensure that FCCOL continues to be the source of strength, support and sustenance during a strange and sometimes bewildering moment. When you receive your pledge card in the mail in the coming week, sit with it, and consider what feels right to you. Everything helps - large gifts and smaller ones too. But I hope you'll fill it out, and bring it with you next week, or that you drop it in the mail, confident that your gift is a rose that might just help to uphold the life of another.

I'll close with the words of the Apostle Paul, words that form our Stewardship Theme for the year. Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is

pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Think about treasures in heaven, in other words. Think about roses. Think about what a human life requires for sustenance. Think about the ways that you - you! - your faith, your commitment, your generosity, are helping to provide just that: bread, but roses too. Amen.