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The First Congregational Church Of Old Lyme, Ct.

August 4, 2024

Text: Ezekiel 47:7-9 & 12, Proverbs 29:18(a) (King James Bible translation), Ephesians 1:16-19(a), Revelation 21:1-5 and 22:1&2

“In Difficult Times You Should Always Carry Something Beautiful in Your Mind” (Pascal)

Some time ago, as I hurried out of the Big Y, I noticed a small car with a curious advertisement plastered to its side:

Natasha’s Soul Cleansing

As I made my way home, it dawned on me that I should have paused and taken down the details. Who is Natasha? And exactly how does she cleanse souls? I’ve been ruminating on that question ever since. Does Natasha offer a “quick fix”? Or does the process necessitate a whole series of sessions? And what on earth does it mean to *cleanse* a soul?

It’s a worthy question in our time, for I believe we live in an era one could describe as an age of *zerrissenheit*. The German word *zerrissenheit* means a state of being when everything seems to be torn to pieces. Webster defines it as a time of internecine strife. Whether or not our souls are somehow “soiled” – they are certainly damaged by the turmoil. All around us things do seem to be falling apart. The center does not hold. Our inner spirits feel unsettled, and often anxious.

In my pastoral visiting, I would say anxiety is the most common theme of the conversations. There’s the climate.... there’s the Middle East... there’s Russia and Ukraine...there’s the tension and anger that permeates and maligns our own society... and then there are the day-to-day worries that are a natural part of life within families and friendships. The list goes on and on and on.

If the soul can be thought of as a kind of stabilizer – an anchor, to borrow a nautical image – then in a time of *zerrissenheit* we are adrift; tossed about by the chaotic forces around us. I am doubtful that Natasha professes to minister to what happens to be my perception of soul cleansing or soul-reorganizing. But when I think of her business signage, that’s where my mind goes.

Each of us might have a different answer about how best to nurture and protect our souls. But I return often to those words from Pascal, “In difficult times we must always carry something beautiful in our minds.” I think of that as a soul-healing or soul-redeeming prescription.

The early 20th century Czechoslovakian poet, Rainer Maria Rilke said that in difficult times we should endeavor to stay close to one simple thing in nature. The Celtic mystic, John O’Donohue writes that “When the mind is festering with trouble, or the heart torn, we can find healing among the silence of mountains or fields...or find solace in listening to the simple, steady rhythm of waves. Stillness overtakes us. And we can then let go of the tired machinations of the ego.” Who among us does NOT suffer in the middle of the night from “the tired machinations of the ego?” Our minds spin as if on the exercise wheel of a gerbil frantically running nowhere in his cage.

O'Donohue goes on to say, "When we go out into nature, clay is returning to clay. We are returning to participate in the stillness of the earth which first dreamed us.... Solitude gradually clarifies the heart until a true tranquility is reached." (from *The Invisible Embrace of Nature*: John O'Donohue: 2004)

The 13th century mystic, Meister Eckhart, urges us to cultivate a style of mind that can reach through to an inner stillness and calm. "The world cannot ruffle the dignity of a soul that dwells in its own tranquility." (from O'Donohue 2004: p 18)

In our scripture lesson this morning from the prophet Ezekiel, we read: "Everything will live where the river goes...there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing."

There is an old wooden bench on an outcropping of ledge a few hundred yards from our back door. Sitting out there it is entirely possible to look up at the leaves of the oaks and birches and be awed by the intricate symmetry of the pattern of the delicate veins in their leaves. It is possible to imagine being clothed in the green of the forest – being swallowed up by its lush bounty. It's possible to be restored by the sunlight and brilliant blue skies and clouds that race past in the wind. In the peace of the forest, one can be humbled by the skillful power of a red-tail hawk in flight, or soothed by the haunting song of a mourning dove at break of day. Out there it is entirely possible to drink from a solace that comes from the deepest regions of earth's mysteries. In the quiet of that bench in the forest, to borrow from the words of Ezekiel, one can find oneself in a sanctuary. A sanctuary of healing and restoration.

If we can only imagine being able to strip away from the world the competition, the lust for power, and the insatiable desire for possession of territory that drives so much of our strife, we might finally come to understand, and *make real*, those words from Revelation that come so close to the end of the New Testament?

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...and I heard the voice of God saying, "Behold, I make all things new" And I saw a river of the water of life, bright as crystal... and on either side of the river was the tree of life....and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations...."

That's a vision worthy of time spent on the old wooden bench, living inside one's imagination and pondering the words of Proverbs, "Without a vision, the people perish."

There are other ways to be healed in the womb of mother earth; to be restored in the sanctuary of nature. If you are a kayaker, try floating with the current in the river, and call to mind those words of T.S. Eliot "I think God is like a strong, brown river." Let yourself imagine that you float along on the bosom of God as the current carries you. You can trust the river to carry and hold you; in much the same way that you can trust in God's mysterious and constant presence. Hear the cry of the osprey as they call out to warn you to stay far away from their young. Watch for the vibrant pink of the mallow – our native hibiscus – that stands in stark contrast to the subtle browns and grays of the marsh grasses this late in summer. Notice the clarity of the water as you float- so clear you can see all manner of vegetation beneath you. Look for the Virginia Creeper vine that climbs the cliffs along the river's

edge; just now beginning to hint at its shift from the green of summer to the deep red of Fall. Commune in this sanctuary without walls.

To return to Rilke's words, that "in difficult times we should endeavor to stay close to one simple thing in nature," would you choose to stand among the giant trees, or float along on the current of the river? Would you choose to sit for a time beneath the stars at midnight? Or rise early to see the sun break over the horizon?

The Greek word for "the beautiful" is **kalon**. It is related to the word **kalein** from which we derive the notion of "call." When we experience beauty, we feel *called*. To quote O'Donohue once again, "The beautiful" stirs passion and urgency in us and calls us from aloneness into the warmth and wonder of an eternal embrace."

(abridged from O'Donohue 2004: p13)

I have a friend who told me recently that she keeps one of those rotating picture screens near her work computer. And on it she enters her collection of photos of "beautiful things." Sunrise...sunset... ..roses...butterflies.... smiling grandchildren... songbirds at the feeder. She says it's a counter balance to all that threatens to ravage her soul. "In difficult times, you should always carry something beautiful in your mind."

Wherever you find beauty - on the river, along the shores of the sound or in the forests – fasten the image of that beauty to your mind and memory. It will nurture and sustain you through the winds of turmoil that will surely assail us.

Earth is rich in healing power. This sermon is not only a call to reach for beauty and hold it fast. But it is a call to live in reverence **for** the earth – to see it and understand it as a sanctuary – as the sacred work of the Creator. Mother Earth is **vital**. She is alive. She is beautiful beyond any description. She nourishes us from the bounty of her womb. Not only with everything that we eat and drink, but also with a solace that comes from the deepest regions of her mysteries. We are privileged to be one strand in what is a wonderfully, awesomely-woven web of all creation. And I believe that what we cherish, we will protect with all the strength we can muster.

Edna St. Vincent Millay, in a poem entitled "Renascence," gives us these words,

"I know the path that tells Thy way
Through the cool eve of every day
God, I can push the grass apart
And lay my finger on Thy heart"

What if we really understood creation to be an emanation of God, the Creator? How then would we tread upon it? Surely with reverence, being careful not to rob from it the treasures upon which future generations will depend. Surely we would honor its beauty, and sit with reverence in its sanctuaries.

I think the next few months ahead of us will be challenging in many ways. I think the divisions in our country will manifest themselves in increasingly troubling ways. The path ahead is neither obvious nor easy. Preserving time to worship in the sanctuaries without walls will be essential to our well-being.

But we are gathered this morning in a sanctuary **with walls**; a sanctuary made of wood and steel and concrete that has withstood countless tempests in our country's history. And here we find the vital complement to the solitude so essential to our peace of mind. Here we find the shelter and compassion that we offer to one another as fellowship. And that fellowship is a precious gift that enables us to stand strong in the face of the winds of change.

Savoring and cherishing beautiful things does not exempt us from the responsibilities of our citizenship, our faith, and our commitment to building a safe future that all people can share. There is work to be done all around us, and our faith calls us to action. But in this time of **zerrissenheit** it may be our salvation to hold fast to whatever beauty and peace we can find – whenever we do find it. Hallow it.... Hold it tenderly... for it has the power to cleanse and redeem our weary souls.

May we go out into the world this day in peace – in search of beauty- with prayers of gratitude on our lips, and trusting in the currents of the river of God to support us wherever we are carried.

Amen