

Exodus 3:1-8; 4:10-13
Luke 6:12-19

July 19, 2020

A PRAYER (EN PLEIN AIR) ON THE OLD SAYBROOK TOWN GREEN
(A SERMON PREACHED AT THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF OLD LYME)

First of all, a word of gratitude to Steve for his kind and gracious invitation to preach this morning. Also, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Steve, Laura and Carleen for their extraordinary leadership, creativity and compassion during this sad and difficult time.

I've much appreciated the wisdom they and our board of deacons and all the other church leaders have exemplified. They have helped our church to navigate these troubled waters – the coronavirus crisis, yes, but also the latest painful reminder that our beloved country has much work to do to overcome the systemic racial injustices and divisions that keep us from being the “beloved community” we know we could be and should be.

“Love in the time of Corona”, yes, but also, Love on this Day of Reckoning, this opportunity for Redemption.

In preparing themselves for battle, the Lakota would offer a prayer, saying, “Nake nula waun”. While popular culture changes that to, “today is a good day to die”, a more accurate translation would be, “I am ready for whatever comes.”

So yes, given the challenges we face, in the struggle to make this a better and safer and more just and peaceful world for our children, we do find ourselves embattled and so, “Today is a good day to die.”

But it's an even better day to be alive. To live with a sense of purpose. Its a good day to be up on our toes, ready for whatever comes.

It's a good day to be a church! It may not seem so given all the challenges we face, but moments such as this actually define what it means to be a church, and while some churches, overwhelmed by the challenges, might shrink back into their cocoons and say, “wake me up when it's over”; wake me up when it's over so I can go back to being XYZ church on the corner of Main and Mediocrity.

Not this one! Time and time again, I have seen this church rise to the occasion. Like troubadours, it's as if you are saying, “now is the time for our song to be heard.”

I have seen your spirit and I have been reminded of how Shakespeare spoke of Love in one of his poems:

Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds.
Or bends with the remover to remove

O no, it is an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken. It is the star to every wandering bark.

It does at times seem as if the whole world has been set adrift by the cataclysmic world in which we live, and so I for one, am very grateful for our church's ministry.

Let's look once again at Shakespeare's language:

"Or bends with the remover to remove."

The "remover" is a subtle but very important personification of a temptation we all sometimes face – the temptation to "remove" ourselves from the field of battle. The temptation to "remove" ourselves from the public square. The temptation to allow ourselves to be removed by the siren voices of escapism and self-doubt.

Individually and collectively, we've all come face to face with the "Remover", from time to time. And so, we need each other to be that "ever-fixed" mark, that "Star" by which we can keep our kayaks and our feet moving in the right direction.

I must say it feels good to be back in our beautiful meetinghouse once again, and I look forward to the day when we all can be together in this house of prayer.

As is true with most of us, my weekly prayers have been *en plein air*, as the French Impressionists would say. When the light was just right, Claude Monet, Renoir and the others would grab their portable easels and run outside with a blank canvas to do their painting *en plein air*.

The French language has an amazing ability to make the most mundane sound much more lyrical and romantic! In my home state of Indiana, we would say, "Hey, you guys, I'm going outside to paint." But, I like how the French language elevates the endeavor.

Also, philosophically and even theologically, I like the idea of *en plein air*. Don't go with a lot of preconceived lines and drawings. Leave your canvass blank and see what the Light reveals. I like the dialectic between artist and nature, and with the everchanging light, for the artist, there must be an element of surprise in whatever finds its way onto the canvass.

"Hey, I didn't know you were going to paint a bridge overlooking a lily pond. Where did that idea come from?" Sounds like something Paul Gauguin might say to Claude Monet.

But in the French language I'm sure it would have sounded much more eloquent.

So it is, I think, with our prayers. I love the more formal prayers of our traditional worship services. I love being able to recite The Lord's Prayer, week after week, and to be honest with you, I also love the so-called archaic language of the Book of Common Prayer, and

for my old fashioned love for the language of Shakespeare, the 1928 prayer book is beyond compare:

O thou who are the light of the minds that know thee, the life of the souls that love thee, and the strength of the wills that serve thee, help us so to know thee that we may truly love thee, so to love thee that we may fully serve thee, whom to serve is perfect freedom

As much as I love such old, old traditional prayers, over the last 4 months, by necessity, my prayers have been *en plein air*

In this type of prayer, we take the canvass of our heart out into the world, out into the public square. We take off our shoes, and we listened quietly to the world in which we live – the good and the bad. And we wait, and we wait for the light. We wait for enlightenment.

That's a different sort of prayer, and for prayers such as this, there's always an element of surprise.

In a few moments, I'll share with you one of my own prayers, en plein air, but first I'd like to share with you the prayers of Moses and a 19 year old poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay, both of whom had powerful experiences that were born out of their prayers.

In our Scripture lesson for this morning, we find Moses, having *removed* himself from the field of battle. There's the work of "*the remover*" once again.

His people were struggling for liberation, trying to free themselves from slavery. Moses had grown up a person of *privilege*, and in a moment of indignation, righteous indignation he acted out against that injustice. But sadly, like a lot of individuals and churches on the road to being what they've been called to be, he lost his nerve.

So, now where do we find him? We find him out in the elysian fields of Midian. I think of Moses tending the sheep in Midian, and I think of one of my favorite paintings in the Parish House. Carleton Wiggins almost always painted only cows and sheep, and sometimes I wish I could just walk right into his painting, stretch out in the green grass and pretend that the rest of the world does not exist.

The voice of the Remover can be very seductive and persuasive. But the good news and the bad news is that God's Love, the Call of Conscience is ubiquitous. It can find us wherever we are, no matter how determined we are to "*remove*" ourselves.

So, if you know the story of Moses, you know that it is out there in Midian that Moses feels or hears the Call of God, the Call of Conscience once again.

Moses tries to persuade God that really it would be better to send someone else. Besides, he says, I'm slow of speech. My brother, he's a much better talker than I am. He has been known to sell coal to Newcastle, and he's even sold a blue tie to the President! (That's from the King James Version of the bible.)

And here is the part of the story that I particularly love. Moses is told to take off his shoes and to feel the sanctity of the earth, to feel the goodness of God's Creation.

And so, it was out of this prayer, barefoot, en plein air, that Moses felt propelled – reluctantly – to be a liberator for his people.

This introverted prophet with no confidence in his ability to speak, spoke truth to power and in his prophetic leadership, his words, however inadequate they may have seemed at the time echoed down through history, wherever there was a struggle for justice and human rights:

“I have been to the mountaintop and I have seen the Promised Land.... “Words from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that originated with Moses in the land of Midian.

If that's what a prayer en plein air can do, we need more of such prayers!

Fast forward now some 3000 years. In a small town in Maine, living on the “wrong side of the tracks” we find a 19-year-old by the name of Edna St. Vincent Millay. In order to find employment, her mother was frequently away from home and so Edna and her sisters are left to fend for themselves at home.

Being a sensitive child, she takes in and takes upon her shoulders the immensity of the world and all its problems – war, poverty, racism, sexism, greed – All this feels like a giant weight upon her heart, and so she writes a poem, an autobiographical poem and says:

No hurt I did not feel, no death
That was not mine; mine each last breath
That, crying, met an answering cry
From the compassion that was I.

(does this remind you of our own feelings as we have watched the tragic death of George Floyd?)

Ah, awful weight! Infinity
Pressed down on the finite Me!
...And so, beneath the weight lay I
And suffered death, but could not die.

She takes all these raw feelings, all this despair and feelings of self-negation, maybe even thinks of suicide, and she climbs to the top of a mountain, Mt. Battie, near Camden, Maine, and there she discovered what Moses discovered in the land of Midian.

Maybe she also took off her shoes and felt the soil beneath her toes, and looking out over the vast Maine wilderness to the West and the blue, blue ocean to the East, to her surprise, on the blank canvass of her heart, she discovers what can only be called a “renascence”, a resurrection of hope, the rebirth of joy, and so she offers a prayer, en plein air:

O God, I cried, no dark disguise
Can e'er hereafter hide from me
Thy radiant identity!
God, I can push the grass apart
And lay my finger on Thy heart!

Claude Monet found a bridge over a lily pond. Moses rediscovered his calling as a prophet to speak truth to power, and Edna St. Vincent Millay found the joy of knowing that God was with her.

She walked into that poem a poor, sensitive, and intelligent young woman, overwhelmed by the sorrows of the world with little in the way of self-confidence, but she walks out of that poem, a proud woman, a troubadour testifying to the sanctity of God's Creation and the capacities of the human spirit.

Out of that prayer en plein air, Edna went on to become one of the most successful poets our country has ever known, even speaking to a standing room audience at Woolsey Hall in New Haven, if you can believe it.

Well, I suppose the time has come for me to share with you my own prayer en plein air. Having already heard from Claude Monet, Moses and Edna, I confess I feel rather sheepish and inadequate by comparison.

Nevertheless, I do believe that in a congregation, a healthy congregation, it's best if we all can offer our own prayers, and we grow stronger as we listen to each other.

My prayer en plein air will not be the same as yours. Indeed, it might even be antithetical to yours, and so with some trepidation I offer it in a spirit of humility, and then afterward, you can tell me what you think.

After the tragic death of George Floyd, I was grateful that Maryam Elahi invited me to help with the weekly marches for racial justice that she was organizing in Old Saybrook. We meet each week on Wednesday night at 6 PM in front of The Kate, and after a few opening remarks and reflections on various topics, we walk up and down the Main Street.

I happened to arrive early for one of our organizing sessions, and so I took off my shoes and sat down on the green grass in the shade of a beautiful tree, Black Walnut, I think. The night before, Corinne and I watched "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner", a movie I hadn't seen since 1967 when I was a senior in high school. I had forgotten how well-acted it was, and especially, Spencer Tracy, a White liberal who had to come face to face with his own prejudices but finally transcended them.

Stretched out on the grass next to "The Kate", maybe my prayer en plein air was influenced by that movie, but being troubled by the recent death of George Floyd, I was considering how I might respond, how a church might respond.

It was also a time when others in our country were tearing down statues of Columbus and various Confederate Soldiers. While that may be what some feel called to do; I confess, I'm not all that interested in destruction; I'm more interested in construction, or, perhaps a better word, Reconstruction.

Since the Civil War and the promises of the Emancipation, Reconstruction remains a promise largely unfulfilled.

When you pray en plein air, your thoughts can wander, and as I looked up at the cumulous clouds floating by, I remembered how I had shared with a group of seminarians that one could learn a lot about families and what they value by going into their homes and observing what they hang on their walls.

What's true of families is also true of our nation. Public Art says a lot about the values of our civilization.

And so, my prayer started, not with "O God, please do this or that..." but rather "What if..."

Regardless of what we do about Columbus and Confederate generals, What if... What if we here in Southeastern Connecticut could create statues, celebrating some of the great Black heroes who, if they are remembered at all, are remembered only during Black history week or on the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr.

Sitting next to The Kate, in my imagination, I said to myself, "What if there were to be a statue of Paul Robeson, the great singer and actor who because he was Black and thought to be too outspoken on matters of economic justice, by necessity, had to pursue his career overseas? A statue of Paul Robeson next to the Kate would be a reminder of his contribution to our nation.

Perhaps as part of the statue, there could be a bronze plaque, saying, "TONIGHT AT THE KATE! PAUL ROBESON WILL SING "OLD MAN RIVER" "GOING HOME", "SHENANDOAH" and other favorites.

Just down the road in Old Saybrook is the birthplace of Yale College. What if we were to persuade Yale University to build a statue of James Pennington, the first Black graduate of Yale. He escaped from slavery at the age of 19 and like Harriet Tubman, not only freed himself but went on to become an abolitionist.

We should know these stories, our children should know these stories, and if they were part of our public art, they would remind us of our true values as a nation, not what we were in some golden age of nostalgia, not what we are now, but rather what we endeavor to be.

I had recently learned, thanks to some great articles written by Tedd Levy, that a slave auction was held at the corner of Main St. and Boston Post Road in Old Saybrook.

Knowing this, I said to myself, What if... What if we were to redeem the land from the horrible stain of slavery. What if Black artists, past or present students at the Lyme Academy College of Fine Arts could be commissioned to build these statues?

Maybe at the corner of Main Street and Boston Post Road -- a statue of Frederick Douglass or maybe Thurgood Marshall. As a lawyer for the NAACP, Marshall logged over 50,000 miles per year to represent those struggling for justice and civil rights. So, in my prayer, en plein air, I had him standing next to a car – my preference would be a Studebaker. He's holding the Green Book in his hand and he's ready for his next assignment.

And out in front of Center School, here on Lyme Street, what if a distinguished young Black artist could create a statue of one my favorite heroes in the struggle for human rights – 6-year-old Ruby Bridges.

In my imagination, I see families walking past that statue and I hear children asking their parents, “who was Ruby Bridges?” Well, let me tell you, they say, as they sit down on a bench next to the statue. Ruby was a 6-year-old child escorted to school by federal marshals. She would be the only Black child in an all White School, and she walked with remarkable dignity past angry people who spat upon her and shouted racial epithets.

No parents would allow their White children to be in Ruby's class, but Barbara Henry, bless her, a White teacher from Boston, lovingly taught Ruby for the entire year, even though she was the only student in the classroom.

We need such stories, and at this time when there's so much anger and indignation, we all need positive ways to channel our energy.

In my prayer, I also saw an artist with two paintings, maybe prototypes of what would be a giant mural on the wall of one of our communities.

On one canvas, there would be an artistic rendering of the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. It would show the bridge as it was on March 7, 1965. If you look carefully, maybe you'll see John Lewis and Martin Luther King Jr. on that bridge. Maybe you could also pick out a young Black woman, Amelia Boynton who was beaten unconscious that day but survived and lived to be 104! Maybe you can see police in riot gear, and vicious dogs ready to attack, and if you listen carefully to the painting, maybe you can hear a Native American saying,

“Nake nula waun”. Today is a good day to die.

And then right next to that painting, there would be another, showing the same bridge. Only this time, there are Blacks and Whites and Latinos and Native Americans and Asians and all people of color all walking across the bridge together, escorted by police who are cheering them on. And if you listen carefully, someone says,

“Nake nula waun”. Today is a good day to live. And if you look carefully at this second painting, you'll see water lilies beneath the bridge. Also a sign on the bridge, **John R. Lewis**.

I'd be on the lookout for a young Black Claude Monet to do this mural.

Now, how would also this be financed? In my prayer en plein air, we would have bushel baskets of \$20 bills. We all would be challenged to turn in our \$20 bills to redeem them for this purpose, and at the same time, we would urge our government to change Andrew Jackson to Harriet Tubman.

There's one more "What if..." to join the others. As I was sitting there on the Old Saybrook green, I remembered with prayers of thanksgiving our church's friendship and partnership with the Madry Temple, a predominantly Black congregation in New London.

We got to know each other through a remarkable woman, Rachel Robinson, the widow of the great baseball player, #42, Jackie Robinson. While many people know and admire the pioneering spirit and athleticism of Jackie; the world doesn't know enough about this woman of remarkable intelligence and dignity.

After her husband died much too young, Rachel founded the Jackie Robinson Foundation that has provided hundreds of academic scholarships for those most in need.

We and our friends at the Madry Temple got to know her when we learned that she donated land in Salem to Habitat for Humanity, and our two congregations decided to team up together to build that house. We also built another house on Pattagansett Road in East Lyme on land donated by Judy and Phil Simmons.

Not only were these houses built, but also. it brought our two quite different congregations close together. We had church picnics and played volley all together. Their wonderful Pastor, Pastor Jack Madry is also an accomplished Jazz pianist, and so thanks to him and members of his church, we had Jazz concerts to celebrate the building of those houses.

Shortly after that, some members of their church and our church traveled together to Durban, South Africa to work with a global community in building 200 houses in one week, and up on the scaffold with me, I am very proud to say, was this 79 year old woman, Rachel Robinson. The only time I saw her upset or frustrated was when there wasn't enough to do!

The other day, I shared my prayer en plein air with Pastor Jack and was grateful for his enthusiastic response. I said, "what if we were to commission a statue of Rachel Robinson, maybe in Salem where she has a home or maybe at the Madry Temple in New London. In New London, I love Norman Lagasse's sculpture of Eugene O'Neill, but I would also love a statue of Rachel Robinson, a woman who after their wedding was bumped off a plane because of the color of her skin, but now, years later, showing the magnanimity of her spirit, she donated land to Habitat for Humanity for a White family in need.

We need to remember such stories. We need to remember such heroes of the human spirit, and maybe in honor of Rachel Robinson, we covenant with 5 other communities to help build a statue or create a mural in honor of some of the champions I have mentioned, and in each

of those communities, maybe churches, mosques and synagogues can work together with other civic and secular organizations to build Habitat for Humanity homes – 5 statues and 5 houses. Or maybe 200 houses!

That wouldn't solve our systemic problems, but it would be a step in the right direction, and it would be a public statement of affirmation – this is the country that we love, and this is the country we endeavor to become.

For Rachel's statue, like John Henry, I'd show her "with a hammer in her hand" only hers would be carpenter's hammer. This would be in one hand, and she would have a book in the other, in honor of her dedication to academic scholarships.

Well, that's at least part of my prayer en plein air. I would be very interested to hear what yours might be, and to paraphrase my favorite American poet, Bob Dylan:

"I'll let you be in my prayer, if I can be in yours!"

Amen.

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