

July 24, 2016

Tim Hughes

Sermon: Shadow & Substance

Old Testament Reading: Psalm 51:10-19

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

¹¹Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.

¹⁴Deliver me from bloodshed, O God, O God of my salvation, and my tongue will sing aloud of your deliverance.

¹⁵O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.

¹⁶For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased.

¹⁷The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

¹⁸Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem,

¹⁹then you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

New Testament Reading: Colossians 2:6-19

⁶As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. ⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the

universe, and not according to Christ. ⁹For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. ¹¹In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; ¹²when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

¹³And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, ¹⁴erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

¹⁶Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. ¹⁷These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church.

Sermon: Shadow & Substance

*You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.*

*Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.*

*Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.*

The first time I read Mary Oliver's poem, "Wild Geese," that opening line popped off the page in a way that made me feel nervous.

You do not have to be good.

Well, I remember thinking, I wouldn't go that far. I was sitting in my little dorm room at Princeton Seminary, having only been there a few weeks, very new to the idea of theological education, just dipping my toe into the notion of ordained ministry. The poem was handwritten in multi-colored pencils, with a glittery border dusted around its edges. It was maybe the gayest thing ever, and it had been delivered to my room by another gay student, an encouraging little note after one of our many tortured conversations about being Christian and gay.

You do not have to be good.

Wouldn't that be nice, I thought, tucking the poem away in my dresser drawer. Later that night, as I lay in my bed, I couldn't keep Mary Oliver out of my head,

*You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.*

See to me, Oliver's poem was everything my conservative Christian upbringing had warned me about. To my evangelical friends and family, the progressive Protestant Church was just one long slow slip 'n slide into hell. Unchecked questioning slipping into theological compromises sliding into all kinds of irresponsible, sinful decisions.

The tragedy of it all, these friends would say sadly, is that you won't even realize how far you've strayed until late in the game, when you realize that your faith is just a shell of what it once was. When you realize how far you've traveled from Jesus.

I know that all of those voices were buzzing in the back of my head when Mary Oliver proclaimed, "You don't have to be good." And while I can't claim to have had this thought explicitly, I know that "Wild Geese" seems to be in direct conflict with another poem with which I was much more familiar: Psalm 51.

"I know my transgressions," the Psalmist writes. "My sin is ever before me. Wash me thoroughly, and cleanse me from my sin."

Maybe you don't have to walk through the desert on your knees for a hundred miles, repenting, I thought. But if we are taking Psalm 51 seriously, you should at least be *sorry*. Mary Oliver didn't seem to be very sorry. I dismissed the poem, but didn't throw it away. It stayed folded up in my sock drawer, like a promise.

This week, we continue to make our way through Paul's letter to the Colossians. The letter was likely written by someone from the school of Paul, rather than the apostle himself, but nonetheless it is a prominent voice in a vital conversation about what it means to live the Christian life.

It's easy to forget that there was no such thing as Christian heretics when this letter was written. The church was just too new, too unformed, to have defined orthodoxies. Instead, they were sorting things out in the laboratory of their everyday lives, their fledgling churches, their conversations. It's in that context that this letter was written. The stakes were high.

One of the biggest challenges of understanding this letter to the Colossians is that it is clearly addressing a conflict that is apparently so self-evident that it is never explicitly named in the text. Because the

letter stands alone today, we are forced to rely on context clues to imagine why the author finds herself so concerned about the Colossians.

The heart of the matter seems to be in Chapter 2, Verse 8:

⁸See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.”

Now, at first blush, that kind of warning conjures images of my old conversation partners, dragging out their slip ‘n slide once again. “Be *careful*,” they say gravely. “Do not be deceived by worldly teachings, only to find yourself separated from Jesus.”

I confess, that was my own initial reading of the text. But a closer reading suggests a subtle, crucial difference. It seems likely that there was a sub-group of people in the Colossian community who practiced an extreme asceticism. That is – they took a set of religious rules – what to eat, and what to touch, and when to pray – and then took it to an extreme that went well beyond any Jewish traditions. It also seems that these people who practiced this extreme self-denial also claimed to have incredible mystical visions – a visceral, powerful knowledge of God not available to the other people.

As a matter of fact, this logic – a life of self-denial that would reveal spiritual secrets – this was a very common Greco-Roman way of thinking about spirituality. It’s part of a larger philosophy called dualism. Dualists thought of the world in terms of two dual levels – elements of the world, and elements of the spirit. Elements of the world were lesser and corrupt, while elements of the spirit were superior and pure. For dualists who also claimed to be Christian, it was only logical to assume that drawing closer to God meant distancing yourself from the world. Hence, all the rules. Hence, a sense of superiority over Christians who ate what they want, attended festivals, and exercised freedoms associated with the emerging church and its Gospel.

The author of Colossians rejected this dualism in stark terms. “Do not let anyone disqualify you,” the letter reads. “Hold fast to [Christ] the

head, from whom the whole body is nourished and held together.”
(2:18-19)

The letter goes on to argue that dualism, the division of spirit and world, makes no sense in light of the incarnation. “For in [Jesus], all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through [Jesus] God was pleased to reconcile herself to all things, whether on earth or in heaven.”
(1:19-20)

Rather than despising the created world, God loves, embraces, and embodies it. Rather than scorning the flesh, God clothed himself in it. God’s love and truth are embedded in the world. That’s a radical departure from the Platonic ideals that have shaped so much of Western thought.

In many ways, Greek philosophy proposes that our way of life cultivates wisdom, which then elevates us above our mundane reality to a higher truth.

The Gospel, on the other hand, suggests that the person, work, and presence of Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life. Everything begins there. So it doesn’t make sense to flee the world. The world is where Jesus lives.

And the implications of that way of thinking are kind of enormous.

Mary Oliver doesn’t like to talk about her childhood. In fact, she doesn’t like to give interviews at all. So it was a rare thing when she agreed to sit down with Krista Tippett in 2015, at the age of 86, and talk a little about her upbringing.¹ She describes her childhood home as a “dark and broken house” and “bad for every member of the family,” without going into any more detail. She maintained her sanity, she says, by walking in the woods outside of her Ohio home. Later, when she was

¹ “Listening To The World:” A Conversation with Mary Oliver, www.onbeing.org. February 5, 2015.

old enough, she escaped Ohio all together, moving to Provincetown, Massachusetts with her partner of 40 years, Molly Malone Cook.

She grew up in Sunday School, even as she struggled with some of the heavier theological claims. “I had trouble with the resurrection,” she says bluntly, “so I wouldn’t join the church. But I was probably still more interested than many of the children who did.”

Her poetry became known for its love of the natural world and its deeply spiritual nature. She would rise daily before the sun and walk the beaches of Cape Cod and offer her prayers to God, scribbling away in little notebooks. “Understand,” she writes in a poem called “Bone”:

I am always trying to figure out
what the soul is,
and where hidden,
and what shape...

I believe I will never quite know.
Though I play at the edges of knowing,
truly I know
our part is not knowing,
but looking, and touching, and loving,
which is the way I walked on,
softly,
through the pale pink morning light. ²

There is this notion of living “in Christ” that comes up several times in the letter to the Colossian church. “⁶As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives *in him*, ⁷rooted and built up *in him* and established in the faith.

Live in Christ.

² “Bone” by Mary Oliver. Included in the collection, “Why I Wake Early,” 2004.

It's one of those Christian-y type phrases that we use so much in church that it loses its punch. But truthfully, it's pretty provocative.

Because I don't think Paul intends for us to live in Christ in the way we might be into jazz music or Crossfit. I don't think he means that we should admire him or aspire to live in his legacy, like Martin Luther King.

The idea seems more to root our identity in the game-changing reality of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. The language used here is the language of baptism.

In baptism, we are identified with Christ. As such, we are buried in sin. The sins that Psalm 51 describe so vividly are real and painful and lead us to death. That truth-telling is important.

In baptism, we are identified with Christ. As such, we are resurrected from the dead. We are freed from the powers of sin and the powers of the world.

And here's the kicker – we are freed from the slavery of legalism, freed from obsessing over our righteousness, freed from those who would say – you are not good enough for the family of God.

That legalism, that obsession with purity, with status, with religious excellence – that is only a *shadow* of the thing itself. The thing itself – the substance towards which all that struggling yearns – is Christ. To live in Christ is to be freed from that struggle.

In Jesus, God reminds us, “You don't have to be good. You don't have to be good to be named and claimed in this promise.

You are not saved by what you do.

For those of us who obsess over rules so as to establish hierarchies and prove to God and everyone that we are worthy, this is bad news.

For those of us who understand, on some kind of deep level, our own brokenness, the brokenness of the world, our inability to fix it - this is good news.

The mark of living in Christ is grace.

But here is what I think some of my conservative Christian friends fail to understand. The freedom that comes in Christ is not a freedom to do what you want. It's not just the first step in a long, sinful slide towards self-gratification.

Freedom in Christ is not freedom *from* God. It's freedom *for* God.

It's freedom to love the world in the big, passionate ways. It's the freedom to imagine what we could do together if we could step out from underneath our shame. It's freedom to see in our very own bodies the beautiful image of God – gay bodies, straight bodies, queer bodies, trans bodies, black, brown, and white bodies. You were created by God and God called it beautiful.

Finally, freedom *for* God will ask more of you than you could ever have imagined.

Because to escape legalism is to be free to the much bigger calling to live a life of love, and justice, and service to the world.

I think the truth is that often we play too small, in the service of rules that only approximate the Gospel that we can already claim as true. We obsess upon the shadow, even as the substance of Christ is all around us.

Yesterday, thirty faith communities marched together in the Pride Parade and it was, as always, such a beautiful thing to see. There were, however, a handful of angry street preachers, holding up signs about hellfire, talking about terrible sin of homosexuality. At one point, they directed their attention at interim rector at Emmanuel Episcopal, a

friendly looking woman in a priest's collar, standing beneath a rainbow flag.

"Repent of your sins!" they screamed at her over a loud speaker. All around us the crowd was streaming by in color and glitter, giving the street preachers space and treating them with a remarkable graciousness.

"We believe that God loves everyone," the rector called out to them.

"We believe that God hates you," the preacher cried out through his megaphone.

"Have a blessed day," she said, like only an Episcopalian can.

I think it was clear enough to the stream of people where the shadow departed the substance. It was clear enough where the love of Christ resided.

It was clear enough who was in touch with their own brokenness, who knew a little something about grace.

It was clear enough who was still trapped in their cage.

I wish could have slipped them a piece of paper, multi-colored and sparkling in the sunlight.

You don't have to be good, it would have read.

Whoever you are, no matter how wounded, or afraid, or lonely. The One whose very name is love, the one who loves the world so much that he entered it to walk among us. That One is with you now – even you, over and over announcing your place in the family of things.