



on belonging

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"I don't want to end up simply having visited this world." - Mary Oliver

I admire people who can say a lot with a few words. Poets know how to do it. Like the Cape Town poets Shabbir Banoobhai or Gabeba Baderoon, who have become dear friends to my soul.

I admire people who can be attentive to the small things of life. Poets know how to do it. Like Mary Oliver, whom I discovered only recently. Her poems helped me to understand in what ways attention can be truly the beginning of genuine devotion. And that "real prayers are not the words,

but the attention that comes first."

I admire people who offer me new metaphors and open windows to re-visit my own religious tradition and to re-discover its treasures. Poets know how to do it.

I have printed for you one of Mary Oliver's most famous poems, *Wild Geese*. The poem says a lot with few words. It is attentive to the small things in life, and it offers me new words, metaphors and windows into my own Judeo-Christian tradition.

I hope that with this poem as my companion I will be able to offer you more than religious phraseology and build bridges for further conversation and inspiration.

I need to be clear, that I cannot claim to speak on behalf of a specific Christian denomination. There are so many Christianities, just within the two denominations that make up our United Church - Congregational and Presbyterian. But I hope that you will get a sense of what moves and concerns us, a small congregation in Rondebosch, as we try to be faithful to our spiritual heritage. What we share at our gatherings is a desire to become more fully human and more committed to this earth and all its people. And in all of this we continue to draw inspiration and comfort from Jesus, the peasant preacher from Nazareth, our Rabbi, prophet, Messiah, brother, and wonderful incarnation of God's Word of love for the world.

So here is the poem, which will guide my thoughts:

*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 your 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.*

A poem, just like a musical composition needs to go somewhere. This is also true for our spiritual journey. According to Mary Oliver our ultimate calling and destination is the discovery of our place “in the family of things.” It reminds me of the prophet Isaiah’s vision of a child in the midst of a peacable animal kingdom, where wolf and lamb, lion and ox, lie side by side, and where a child plays at a cobra’s den. It speaks of living no longer in fear, of all species truly belonging to this earth, of finding their place in the family of all things. This is why you will find a few animal sculptures in our front garden. They are inspired by this vision of peace on earth. And this is why, in line with Jesus’ own teaching, the child has moved into the center of our church ministry, as Sunday by Sunday they attend the Holy Circus. A child will lead, Isaiah prophesied. And Jesus said that we would all have to become children again, to enter the kingdom of God.

But how do we get there, to such a sense of belonging, of truly knowing our place in the family of all things? The poem suggests three signposts which echo Jesus’ own core

teachings: Firstly, be soft; secondly, be connected; and thirdly, be imaginative.

To be soft.

*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 your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.*

Our Rabbi Jesus does not expect perfection, but compassion. With the words of Richard Rohr: “God does not love us, if we change, but God loves us, so that we can change.” Such compassion includes “the soft animal of your body.” If I cannot love myself, how am I supposed to love others. I remember receiving a handwritten note from one of my guitar students at Maximum in Pollsmoor prison. He was one of eight students, sitting in a circle, holding a guitar for the first time, and struggling to get his fingers into position. He wrote the following to me: „As I watch my struggling fingers, I can’t help, but wonder if these hands and fingers which brought so much sorrow to a lot of people’s hearts when I murdered their loves ones, can these bring a joyful and delightful song?” Such softness invites vulnerability, the ability to let your defenses down, the only way to build community. “Tell me about your despair,” Mary Oliver writes, “yours, and I will tell you mine.” A moment of profound connection across painful divides. A moment of homecoming, of belonging, of discovering our place in the family of all things.

To be connected.

*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.*

„Meanwhile.“ So much happens while the world keeps turning and the seasons keep changing. Our prophet Jesus also calls us to be attentive to the sun and rain. Did you notice? It always rains on both the good and bad, the rich and poor, the privileged and the marginalized. If God shows such patience and generosity to all, who are we to treat people differently, and sometimes to even give up on some? Who are we to decide who deserves our attention and who doesn't? We forget so easily, that there is only one creator, and we are all God's children. We all drink from the same well. And therefore we are all connected with each other. It is a connection that calls us into responsibility, into the ability to be responsive and not indifferent. Or with the words of the transformer David Manne: "We are not only responsible for what we do to others, or what others do to others, but also for what others do to us." We recently had a marriage ceremony for two men at our congregation. Both men came from countries in Africa, where they suffered persecution and marginalization because of their sexual orientation. 50 members of our congregation attended the wedding ceremony to offer their support and express their solidarity. A moment of profound connection across painful divides. A moment of homecoming, of belonging, of discovering our place in the family of all things. "Meanwhile", Mary Oliver writes, "the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again."

To be imaginative.

*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.*

Our Messiah Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve. And he keeps pushing us to imagine a life that is not lived at the expense of other lives. We keep searching for our place "in the family of things", in the family of all things, which includes our different cultures and religious traditions. We all need to know that

despite and because of our differences we belong, belong to the same family sharing the same earth, the only home we have. When Jesus said that he is the way, the light, and the truth, he did not claim that Christianity is the only way to God. He was simply affirming the central value of love, as embodied in his own life and ministry. It is such self-giving love that is affirmed and celebrated as the only way, the only light and the only truth, able to bring us closer to God and to each other. You cannot be more inclusive than this: For from now on, those who dwell in love, dwell in God, and those who dwell in God, dwell in love. (I am paraphrasing from the first letter of John.) Such love calls us to be imaginative about a life not lived at the expense of other lives. And such love makes us also more attentive to the way "the world offers itself to our imagination", calls us „like the wild geese, harsh and exciting - over and over announcing our place in the family of things.“

Since I had read that in many African cultures the ancestors come to visit us in the form of animals at important thresholds and celebrations, I have become more aware of their presence. I didn't notice them before. But now that I have become more attentive, I notice them all the time. I will never forget the call of the wild geese, passing over our church roof, at exactly the moment, when one of our congregants, Suellen Shay, led us in prayer at our Pentecost service, celebrating the coming of God's Spirit. Among the Celtic Christians, the goose is honored to be one of the central images for the Spirit - wild and uncontrollable. A moment of profound connection. A moment of homecoming, of belonging, of discovering one's place in the family of all things.

To be soft, to be connected, and to be imaginative will protect us „from simply having visited this world“ and to truly belong to this earth and all its creatures.