

Sermon
The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 12th, 2023
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott

Readings: [DEUTERONOMY 30:15-20 OR SIRACH 15:15-20; PSALM 119:1-8; 1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-9; MATTHEW 5:21-37](#)

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one, wild and precious life?

These are words of the poet Mary Oliver, in her poem “The Summer’s Day”. *What is it you plan to do with your one, wild and precious life?* This is a question that whispers to us in our humanity. It whispers to us in society and pushes to answers that revolve around outside measures of status and success, to answers that are about power and control, and in this context we can be left feeling adrift about what it is that we are doing with our life. This question whispers to us in Scripture in a different way. In Scripture, the “do” – the action – of what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life – is linked to growth and transformation. In Scripture, especially in the Gospels, we are invited to see that our “doing” is always relational. It is always connected to God and to one another and to our world. When we link the question “What is it that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” to our faith as followers of Jesus, we root it in growth and transformation and in relationship.

We’re in the Sermon on the Mount again today, and it’s important to remember that as we encounter the passage we’ve just heard, with its hyperbole of cutting off body parts and burning in hell: today’s passage follows Jesus’s words about salt and light last week, and his words of blessing in the Beatitudes the week before.

Jesus spoke the words of the Beatitudes to people who had very little control over what to do with their lives. He spoke those words into a society and a system where power and control and repression dominated. What follows the words of blessing in the Beatitudes are words of affirmation and words of potential for transformation found in salt and light. What Jesus spoke into that system, into that repression in that first century world, was potential and possibility found in a *different, broader, deeper, interconnected way*. He spoke a

different, deeper, way of seeing and being in the world. A different *fulfilled way* of engaging with the Law. A broader, deeper, interconnected way of being in relationship with God, with one another and with our world. Last week I invited you to see the way of Jesus is a path for transformation: transformation in ourselves, and in our world. That invitation into transformation continues today.

Today's passage – which can read like an overwhelming list of “thou shalt nots” that includes our very thoughts – actually continues to invite into potential and possibility for transformation.

It's easy to read this long passage as confirmation that God is incredibly demanding. We might feel that Jesus is taking difficult demands and intensifying them. But notice, these commandments aren't *abstract*: they are relational. Jesus isn't heightening the force of the Law, he is broadening it, and deepening it, by inviting into a place where inner work and transformation can happen. He's taking it to a place where we see that all of life is relational and where we are invited to live in a way that lives into relationship and connections everywhere.

Living into the interconnectedness of life begins with inner work. Jesus is pointing us to a place where we must ask ourselves why do I not murder? Why do I not commit adultery?

Jesus is saying “Don't avoid these things because it's the law, avoid them because you see yourselves and each other for what you are: blessed, salt, light, beloved, divine. Avoid these things because you are living a way that revolves around connection and relationship.

Jesus is magnifying just how important our relationships are to God, how much God wants us to treat each other well, how invested God is in our lives and, therefore, in our relationships.

Jesus is helping us to answer the question “*What is it you plan to do with your one, wild and precious life*”. He is inviting us to root our answers to that question in relationship and connection. He is inviting us to see what we are all beloved and blessed, we are all salt and light. We are invited to let that belovedness, that blessing, that salt and light, transform us from the inside out.

What is it that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? This life is precious. We are all precious, and all of creation is precious. And, we can all break. All of creation can be broken. Life is always “both-and”. Yes, we are light, but we are also shadow. The potential for healing and wholeness is always there, but so is the potential for brokenness – so is brokenness.

Murder, ending life, severs relationships. Adultery splits lives and relationships. Divorce can be a matter of spiritual, emotional, or physical self-preservation, but even when it is the best solution, it still results in some alienation, some fraying of connections, some brokenness. We hear whispers of brokenness in our passage from Deuteronomy. It sets out choices that we all have: some choices will lead to blessing and wholeness, others lead to curses and brokenness. We are invited to “choose life”. How do we choose life? How do we hold each other, and creation? Are we gentle, careful? Or are we rough, and careless? As is so often the case, we are both! Sometimes our actions chip away at others. Sometimes our actions shatter. And, this life, our humanity, the way of our world chips away at us. Sometimes we feel shattered. Our passage from the Letter to the Corinthians is all about brokenness – divisions, quarrelling one against another, and Paul points to wholeness, oneness in God.

And so, as followers of the way of Jesus, repairing is part of what we do in this one wild and precious life. That repairing is both on the inside and on the outside. Knowing that we are beloved, knowing that we are blessed by God before anything else, this begins to repair brokenness in us. As that repair continues on the inside, we are invited to repair the brokenness in our world.

Jesus invites us into creative ways of repairing in this world. As followers of Jesus, repairing is about creating a path back to connection where connections have been frayed, or severed. Part of that repairing has to do with power and control, and with repression. Richard Rohr writes that:

“Repression is the means of control; expression is the means of avoiding control. Truth lies somewhere in between—the rightly called “golden mean” or *via media*. In that in-between place, we’ve got to build a bridge between power and powerlessness. Jesus taught us that we start on the side of powerlessness, but that doesn’t make power wrong. Ultimately, we have to learn how to use power creatively. One word for the Holy Spirit is *dynamis*, which means “power.”

The only people who can be trusted with power are those who know how to live creatively with powerlessness.”(Rohr, Richard. Jesus' Alternative Plan: The Sermon on the Mount (p. 180). Franciscan Media. Kindle Edition.)

We are called to creative repair, with an awareness of that necessary bridge between power and powerlessness. Sometimes that means standing firmly in difficult and uncomfortable places both in ourselves and in our world, and it’s a balancing act. And in that balancing act, in that place of “both-and”, transformation is possible.

Tell me, what do you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? May our plan, as followers of Jesus be rooted in relationship and connection. May we acknowledge brokenness in ourselves and in our world, and at the same time see potential for growth and transformation everywhere. May we experience inner transformation that equips us to repair and transform our world, in Jesus’ name. Amen.