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“An Idyll Tale”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth
17th Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Genesis 29:15–28; Psalm 128; Romans 8:26–39; Matthew 13:31–33, 44–52

Gracious God, be for us as we hear your word; be with us as we ingest your word; go ahead of us in the person of Jesus, leading the way for us to live out your word according to your good purpose with and for the world which you love. Amen.

In Luke's account of the resurrection, in the morning of that first new day,
a group of women, including

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Joanna, and others,
come streaming from the empty tomb with news too good to believe:

Jesus is not here; he is risen,
just as he has proclaimed.

Overwhelmed, the women run to share this shocking good news with other disciples,
who also find it too good to believe, so they don't,
choosing instead to dismiss it as an idle tale,
as nonsense, as delusional thinking,
as a figment of sleep-deprived female imaginations.

So, what does qualify constitutes “the good,” in God's kingdom world,
and what makes good news believable, we need to ask:

Nesting for all birds in one kingdom tree?

Varieties of all kinds of fish in a single net?

Fields full of hidden treasure?

Oysters burping out perfect pearls?

The Psalmist spins an idyll of domesticity in Psalm 128 that reeks

of goodness, happiness, and blessing

that we could easily dismiss as nonsensical or delusional

when cast alongside some of our actual experiences of domestic life,

or at least, that's the way I'm inclined to react to this psalm.

Because when texts like these don't measure up to my experience, don't juxtapose favorably,

I tend to want to dismiss them,

to cut them out of my bible as Thomas Jefferson did,

or to overlook them on my search for more realistic and authentic texts.

"Happy are ALL who fear the Lord, who walk in His ways", the psalm begins.

This hallmark of wisdom literature, this practical guide for living the good life

hearkens back to the thinking of Psalm 1

and the corollary voiced there that it pays to be good,

to delight in the law of the Lord,

but that it doesn't pay to be wicked, or rather it does pay,

but that the payback will be punitive in nature.

This is the moral formula which Job will vehemently come to protest,

and the formula which starts to rub contrary to my sensibilities as well.

Nevertheless, happiness, for the God-fearing person in Psalm 128, takes two forms:

assurances of productive labor and assurances of a fruitful family.

Productive work, the toil of our hands, the psalmist notes,

will be just enough to provide for our needs,

but not an overabundance of wealth that the

prosperity gospel folk try to milk from the text.

The God-fearing person will receive grace sufficient for need—to eat and be filled,

but no more.

As Ted Churn, our new Interim Presbytery Executive reminded us this past Tuesday

at the Presbytery of New Hope's meeting,

quoting that brilliant Rolling Stone's philosopher, Keith Richards,

"You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you find...

you get what you need."

That is the “goodness” that comes from the honest toil of our hands,
according to the Psalmist... and I can buy that. No trouble with that line.

But of course, I'm employed today.

But if I weren't, then as a God-fearing person, I might want to blow this one off,
dismiss it as another idle tale.

And the home life of the God-fearing person, the psalmist notes, likewise will be blessed,
as described by two metaphors:

vines and the young olive trees, two dynamic horticultural elements
frequently linked in Hebrew literature as symbols of fecundity and plenty.

The spouse of the God-fearing person, the psalmist says, will be like a fruitful vine,
content to remain in the recesses and corners of the home, spitting out babies
like grapes;

And the children of the God-fearing person will be like young olive trees,
sprouting up around the dinner table.

Perhaps this is why there is never an overabundance of food for those
blessed by the toil of their hands—hungry vines and sprouts take their toll.

And so I ask you,

is this your experience of household economics, good God-fearing church people;
is this your experience of family?

Sometimes I think that the best sermon that none of us ever gets to preach
is the one we actually are living

in dealing with all of the crazy discordant events that family life throws our way.

Let me just list a few of the things that my husband and I now know about, as parents,
as a result of our real-life experiences with our own children:

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Anorexia Nervosa,

ADHD, Grand-mal seizures, roofies, debt, running away,

broken bones, Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, Christmas Day in the ER,

depression, and loss of insurance coverage, just to name a few.

Are these included in the psalmist's formula for happiness, blessedness and goodness?

I am reminded of a time, when one of our children ran away from school,
and the principal called us at the church and said that
an APB for our child had been issued... can you even imagine such a thing?
My husband and I were frantic, calling all of our friends to see if our child had turned
up at their house, but they one by one said, "no," not recently.
Only a little time passed, an eternity to us though, when we received a call
from a Pentecostal minister in town,
who said that our child was there at his church, safe, with him,
okay but scared and worried about what people would think
about us being mad and disappointed,
about what people would say about this sudden bolting.

And so these two Presbyterian ministers/inept parents
had to eat humble pie around our table
and go to the other pastor's church to retrieve our child.

Talk about feeling low; talk about feeling like failures as parents and as pastors,
and I consider my husband and myself to be "good" God-fearing people.
We couldn't even keep our own house in order,
and there we were, trying to minister to our congregants at the same time.
However, the Pentecostal pastor, a parent himself, could not have been nicer
in assuring us that our child was safe with him, and that he was more than glad
to provide counseling with any of us, if that would be at all helpful.

Maybe we should have taken him up on his offer!

And my two brothers, bless their hearts, have had their crazy experiences with their
children, as well—things they never thought they would have to deal with.

One of my brothers, easily baffled by his children, frequently makes the
editorial comment: "Hey, I didn't know I signed on for this tour of duty."

The Old Testament lesson today speaks of Jacob agreeing to work for seven years
to earn the hand of Rachel in marriage from her father, Laban.

Jacob thinks that his life is going to be idyllic: perfectly pastoral, romantic and ideal;

that he is marrying for love the woman of his dreams,
that God is smiling upon him, and that everything
will turn out according to *his plan* for the good.

But as that classic line from scripture tells us, "In the morning, there was Leah!"

Laban, the father of the bride(s), has another agenda,
one that he also thinks is for the good.

Laban wants to honor his tradition of arranging the marriage
of his eldest daughter first.

And so in the brouhaha of the wedding festivities,
he slyly switches his "cow-eyed" elder daughter, Leah, for the bride,
assuming that Rachel's youth and good looks will easily lead to marriage
in her near future anyway.

I love that line: "In the morning, there was Leah!"

Substitute any attribute for what you least expect as parents, and you get
the gist of the common thread of these life stories:

In the morning, there was shop-lifting;

In the morning, there was drug use;

In the morning, there was an unplanned pregnancy;

in the morning, there was cancer;

in the morning, there was a stem cell transplant;

in the morning, there was still-birth;

in the morning there was a car accident;

in the morning, there was loss.

This past weekend, I leafed through Sharon Hammond McAlister's memoir,

finished posthumously by her father, Charles Hammond,

after Sharon succumbed to a recurrence of breast cancer in 2009.

Charles and Peggy Hammond are long-time members of FPC,

and their daughter, Sharon, was raised in this church and was a friend
to many members here.

I read Sharon's memoir, *Lucky Girl*, in one sitting because I could not put it down

once I got started.

I was riveted by the confluence of traumas experienced by this one family,
as well as by the incredible resilience of Sharon and her extended family
to cope with the convergence of her breast cancer,
and Sharon's husband's ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease,
all within about a span of about five years.

I was pleased to see Joe Harvard named in the book as a source of support
and pastoral care, and I was pleased to see Mal King named for his beautiful
gesture of empathy, having lost his own father to ALS.

Here the Hammonds lost both their daughter and son-in-law to these terrible diseases,
and Charles is a doctor, a medical practitioner, a healer, a good God-fearing man,
and likewise, Peggy.

I doubt if the Hammonds ever expected their experience of parenting to result
in such tragic loss, or that they would describe themselves as "lucky."

But I do think they would describe themselves as "blessed,"

both before and in the aftermath of this dual tragedy, using the psalmist's terminology.

I think they would be the first to tell you

that in a hidden-treasure/mucky-oyster-shucking kind of way,

Sharon grew to be a priceless pearl of a daughter and a wife,

and that their experience of family has been and continues to be
a surprising parable of unearthed grace and richness.

So, how do we justify the domestic idyll conveyed in Psalm 128

with the less than ideal domestic life many of us find ourselves living?

Do we dismiss it, disregard it as delusional thinking, deny its relativity to our condition?

Or do we dig deeper in the kingdom field of God's word for hidden treasure

and shuck grubby grey kingdom oysters until our fingers bleed,

searching for true pearls of God's wisdom?

In digging deeper into the psalmist's comparison of children to young olive saplings,

I had to research the significance of the olive tree to Middle Eastern culture.

I found that the olive tree is to Israel, ancient and present,

as the sweet potato is to North Carolina:

pure gold, its most valuable commodity, its economic staple and hope.

Olive trees are ancient trees, mentioned by Homer in both *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey*.

They are also mentioned more than 30 times in the Bible, where olive oil

has sacred standing as an element for anointing prophets, priests, and kings, for healing the sick, and for keeping the temple lamps burning, burning, burning.

Olive trees can live to be 2,000 years old, continually producing fruit.

And metaphorically, the leafy branches of the olive trees

are symbols of abundance, fertility, power, purity, wisdom, glory, and peace.

To say that our children and our experience of children is akin to young olive trees

sprouting up around our table is placing paramount value in our children,

claiming them as our most important commodity,

and relegating to them the symbolic qualities of

abundance, fertility, power, purity, wisdom, glory,

and peace.

Jerome Berryman, Episcopal priest and the founder of *Godly Play*,

suggests with boldness that perhaps the church should begin thinking

of children as conveyors of grace, as means of grace, even as sacraments.

Did you get that: children should be considered as sacraments, Berryman suggests!

He notes that in the past, the church has tended to treat children

with ambivalence, ambiguity, indifference or grace.

But now, what he proposes is to shift the emphasis away from

ambivalence, ambiguity and indifference, and lean more and more towards grace.

He bases his theological proposal upon Jesus' blessing of children

and upon Jesus' sayings about adults knowing God by welcoming children,

and about adults needing to be like children in order to mature in faith.

He says that these sayings of Jesus act like words of institution for this

proposed sacrament.

"Part of the strangeness of thinking about children as sacraments," Berryman says,

"is that we are accustomed to thinking about sacraments as being

something we can control better than children, like a touch,
oil, water, bread, or wine...

But isn't that the point? *A means of grace is not meant to be controlled by people
because grace is God's.*"

(Jerome Berryman. *Children and the Theologians*, p. 230-231)

No, children can't be controlled, and neither can God's grace,
which is why I find myself terribly intrigued by Berryman's radical idea
and wonder if we might be a better church
if we were to place greater emphasis upon
the welcome and nurture of all children in our midst.

As a matter of fact, I think it might be the next frontier in our ecclesiology.

We have opened the door to the inclusion of women;

we are working hard to make our churches more socio/economically diverse;

we have prepared the way for the full rights of membership

for our lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered friends,

and now, perhaps, God is calling us to take a serious look at the way we,

as a church, welcome and include children,

all children, the able and the disabled,

all the young olive trees around our table,

the subject of the psalmist's idyll tale of goodness,

happiness, blessing and peace.

I truly do think children are our treasure trove, waiting to be unearthed.

Perhaps this idea of children as sacraments sounds extravagant or naive to us,
as even Berryman himself admits—

as an idle tale, delusional thinking, as easily dismissable.

Until we remember that other idle tale, which makes all things possible:

in the morning, there was an empty shell of a tomb;

in the morning, there were angels;

in the morning, there was excitement;

in the morning, there was resurrection;
in the morning, there was joy;
in the morning, there was surprising goodness;
in the morning, there was unbelievable good news;
in the morning, there was uncontrollable grace;
in the morning there was Jesus, priceless treasure. Amen.