

Lent 4A
The Rev. Emily Richards
March 26, 2017

Miracles Inside the Muddy Mess

On Monday, the first official day of spring, I was looking out the back door of the rectory and I saw snow, piles of snow. Mother Nature had teased us with a very mild winter before we were walloped with a March snowstorm. When I looked out a second time, I saw something else. Sticking out of those piles of lingering snow, were tiny purple headed crocuses. These were the same crocus that had begun to sprout weeks before when spring seemed to make an early arrival. March is always the ficklest month and with climate change it's only getting more unpredictable. It is often the ugliest month. Before spring can dazzle us with yellow forsythias and pink dogwoods, it's pretty darn ugly, with nothing but mud and muck and in our case leftover snow. I wonder if that's why the early crocuses and daffodils seem even more beautiful as they make their way into the light of day. "They are a harbinger of hope, even as we remain mired in the muck. They remind us that there's a miracle inside the muddy mess: that the earth is preparing for rebirth," says Parker Palmer.*

Jesus takes the muddy mess of the earth, the very dirt of the road on which the man born blind had been standing for years, begging for food and money, begging for someone to stop and recognize his need. Mixing the mud with his own saliva Jesus turns it into the miraculous stuff that gives the man born blind a chance for a new life. Like so many of Jesus' other healing stories this one could have ended with the miracle itself- the man washes in the pool of Siloam and he is healed! But in typical fashion John turns the miracle into one of his long drawn out conversations -to explore further its implications for the newly sighted man and those around him. I kind of feel bad for the guy. His sight has been restored and I imagine all he wants to do is to celebrate. *I was blind but now I can see! Rejoice with me!* But no one wants to rejoice with him. The opportunity for celebration turns into a grand inquisition. His friends and family and community are all stuck, confined to their own narrow visions, incapable of truly seeing what is possible.

“Their questions induce a sense of claustrophobia in me,” Jan Richardson writes. “These questions are not doorways into conversation. They are fences...They are designed to reinforce the boundaries of what these people already know, and to keep their landscape of belief, experience, and knowledge safely contained. These questioners are arrogant and aggravating. It would, therefore, be easy to dismiss them as the bad guys in this story. However, in reading the text more deeply I must consider where I find those maddening questioners inside myself. And I feel a measure of compassion for them, because I know the times when, faced with something beyond my own experience, I have scrambled for an illusion of security. I know the times, at least some of them, when I have retrenched the boundaries of my beliefs, when I have been overly defensive of what I think I know, when I have asked a question—of someone else or of myself—that built a wall rather than opening a door.”

Sociologists have conducted studies that show we human beings don't accept the facts about something when they do not fit the narrative we have been told is true. We would rather build walls and fences with the intention of maintaining the status quo because at least the status quo is safe and known. We'd rather keep retelling a narrative that is no longer true because it's better than having to change our thinking and even more so our way of relating to one another. It's why the good ole' saying, “But we've always done it this way” is so effective. It's those maddening questioners inside of us reminding us that nothing good comes from an itinerant rabbi, who mixes his own saliva with mud and puts it over the eyes of a blind beggar.

The maddening questioners always seem to get louder and more annoying when I find myself stuck, when I'm knee deep in the muck of life's or the world's chaos and all I see around me are ugly piles of snow. When the glory of springtime seems so far away and I can't imagine anything blooming, it can take two or three or ten times looking out the window or opening the door to recognize that the world will grow beautiful and fragrant once again. Like the gift of spring, John's story this morning beckons us to look more closely within ourselves and at the world around us and to trust in the green shoots of possibility that proclaim the promise of new and renewed life born out of the muddy mess. A stranger's act of compassion reminds me that the world can be a safe place. A friend's deep listening helps me to see beyond the limits of my own vision. A kind word engenders courage. A visit renews a friendship. A prayer helps to heal the heart. A purple crocus poking its head out of the muddy and snowy ground reveals

God's promises. We are ever needful of learning how to see, how to see beyond our own understanding and experience, how to see the beauty, the goodness, the miracles, both ordinary and extraordinary.

Poet Mary Oliver speaks of this better than most:

Every day

I see or hear
something
that more or less

kills me

with delight,
that leaves me
like a needle

In the haystack
of light.

It is what I was born for—
to look, to listen,

to lose myself

inside this soft world—
to instruct myself
over and over

in joy,

and acclamation.
Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful,

the very extravagant—
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,

the daily presentations.

Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can you help

but grow wise

with such teachings
as these—
the untrimmable light

of the world,
the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?

~ "Mindful" by Mary Oliver

I find it interesting that the word Lent comes from the Old English word for springtime. For we associate Easter and not Lent with the beauty of spring. And yet somehow becoming deeply aware of what's good and beautiful and miraculous requires a kind of Lenten discipline, one in which we must open our eyes, minds, and hearts. As we keep them open, we begin to see and to believe in the miracles that are all around us.**

***A special acknowledgment is given to Parker Palmer and his articles "Spring Is Mud and Miracle" and "The Discipline of Recognizing What's True and Beautiful" which inspired this sermon.*