

Proper 17B

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Cultivating Delight

During my sabbatical I discovered the writer Ross Gay, professor of English at Indiana University who grew up not far from here in Levittown, PA. Almost every day for an entire year he recorded the small joys and wonders that we often overlook in our busy lives and he turned them into a book of essays, entitled The Book of Delights. The delight of drinking that perfect cup of coffee, the delight of noticing flowers growing in the cracks of sidewalks, of playing pick-up basketball games and watching two strangers help one another in a rainstorm. In an interview with him about his book, Krista Tippet observed, “There’s a question floating around the world right now — how can we be joyful in a moment like this? To which Ross Gay responds in word and deed, how can we not be joyful, especially in a moment like this? To be with him is to train your gaze to see what’s terrible but also to see what’s wonderful and beautiful. To attend to and meditate on what you love. “We practice tenderness,’ he believes, ‘in part because to understand that joy is possible in the midst of difficulty.’” During the long days of the pandemic, I have returned to his words for nourishment as they encourage me to pay attention to the daily joys I might otherwise have disregarded.

After nearly a year and a half of isolation, this week’s reading from the Old Testament also serves as a much-needed balm to soothe our weary souls. Within scripture, the Song of Solomon acts as our book of delights. Interestingly, the church has often shied away from this text. Today’s verses are the only ones we hear in our three-year cycle of readings, and even at that, they are considered optional, noted as “the alternative first lesson”. We have been perplexed and even embarrassed by the sensual and suggestive nature of this love poetry. As far back as the third century, the text’s authorship, meaning and place in the canon of scripture have been debated by biblical scholars. This is my first time preaching on these verses outside of the context of a wedding ceremony.

“Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone,” the voice calls out to her partner. “The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.” This passage, like the entire text is set within a lush, romantic scene, evoking the Garden of Eden. “It is a sustaining oasis nourishing its human, plant and animal occupants. The woman and man are in an egalitarian, non-hierarchical relationship,” suggests the Rev. Wil Gaffney. “The natural beauty of the world around them reflects their love. It is paradise. The couple let no beauty go unnoticed or unappreciated. They find delight everywhere: in each other, in the blossoming flowers, fruit-laden trees, singing birds, in the turning of the seasons. Every time they exhale their adoration, they bind themselves ever more deeply to the life of the world that God created. The couple are in harmony with one another and with the natural world; the brokenness of relationships between humans and between humans and the earth is healed. The woman, man, their love and their world are all God’s good, very good, creation.” And they know this. They celebrate this truth. Their eyes have been opened, and they notice that there is no division between body and soul. No separation from the source of the love that has bound them to each other and to all of creation.

The exquisite images from the Song of Solomon convey the same joy and relief we have felt as we have begun to reconnect with our beloveds. The couple’s words become our words of longing. For we desire the winter to be gone; the flowers to appear on the earth; and the time of singing to come. If this unprecedented time has taught us anything it is that we human beings are made for connection and intimacy. We long to see in one another’s faces the very image of the loving Creator who loved us into being. We need the touch of one another’s embrace, to embody loving our neighbors as ourselves. These acts are no less sacred than the sacraments which draw us into the heart of God.

You may remember the Christmas-centric Romantic Comedy ‘Love Actually’. It opened with the scenes of a busy airport terminal. Couples embracing. Friends reuniting. Grandchildren racing towards smiling grandparents. And then you hear a voiceover from one of the characters saying that whenever he gets gloomy about the state of the world, he thinks about the arrivals terminal at Heathrow Airport and the uncomplicated

delight you see on the faces of friends and family as they find each other and reconnect. “It seems to me that love is everywhere. Often, it's not particularly dignified or newsworthy, but it's always there – fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends.” Then he goes on to say that all the known farewell messages by people who died on 9/11 were messages of love, not hate. At the end, the film closes with another scene of airport greetings. I imagine we’ve all witnessed such encounters in airports—the teary hugs and ecstatic hellos. There is something about parting and about coming back together that focuses us on what matters most. When time seems to stand still, and when a word or an embrace holds greater meaning than they ever had before.

These moments train us to gaze on what’s beautiful and sacred in our lives. Especially in a time such as this, when we find ourselves still living amid a global pandemic, when we question how we can even possibly cultivate joy, we need to hear the passionate voices of the poets, writers and artists. For it is through their creativity we are to imagine what is possible. It is through their verses and images, we are invited to delight in the small, but important acts which connect us to one another, and which point us to the One who is the ultimate source of that connection. They inspire us to imitate their way of receiving the world with wonder and praise, reminding us what love actually is. *Amen.*