

A Psalm of Unlearning

Psalm 23; Romans 5:1-8 (The Message) on Sunday, April 25, 2010

I have been thinking about turning sixty years old later this year. My father, who will be eighty-five this year, tells me to “get over it, sixty is still prime time.” I get his point, but I am not really talking about the accumulation of years and aches and pains. I am taking stock of whether I have actually learned anything of value in fifty-nine and a half years. Poet Mary Oliver, upon turning sixty years old, shouted, “Hallelujah, anyway I’m not where I started.” I like her words very much. There is wisdom in *unlearning* what you once thought you knew. At least then you can be honest about the past and free for new adventures.

There’s so much to *unlearn!* When I was younger, for example, I secretly thought my *goals* in life were to be good-looking, important and right-thinking. {Pause.....} Boy, that was a waste of time, wasn’t it?

As I have grown older, I find I know fewer things for sure, but I also find there are fewer things I am afraid of. I once thought that cancer and divorce were two unthinkable life experiences – to be avoided at all costs. I couldn’t imagine handling either one of them. Now I have faced both and I am still standing. Not only standing, but less inclined to worry about the future and more inclined to forgive myself and others. Would I recommend cancer or divorce? No, not easily or lightly! But there are blessings to be uncovered even in what we fear the most!

Two things I have come to know for sure in ways I could not imagine when I was younger. Both are written large in the 23rd Psalm. The first is that *the Lord is my shepherd*. I know little about sheep and shepherding. In my limited experience of sheep, I have found them to be dirty, cantankerous and not very bright. I hope that God does not see me that way. (Although sometimes I have wondered!) But once I was touched by something an actual shepherd told me. He said that on small farms where the sheep have been raised by one shepherd, the sheep know the shepherd's voice. They listen for the tone, inflection and direction of the voice. Even if the flock is mixed in with others, say at a farm fair, the shepherd said, the sheep can distinguish the shepherd's voice from others and will come when the shepherd calls.

I have found as I grow older that I listen for the voice of the Lord intently, for it sounds like no other. There is no blame in it. No wrath. No anxiety. The voice is not liberal or conservative, not Republican or Democrat, male nor female, churched nor unchurched. The voice always invites me to rich experience, to deep and quiet places inside, and to paths of joy and freedom and justice.

There are other voices that call to me besides the shepherd's! But it is only God's voice that invites me to be certain that *I shall not want*. All other voices are voices of want or need or lack. This is where the great *unlearning* begins. The other voices must be unlearned! They` are many, strong and insistent! There is the *voice of fear* about walking the valley of the shadow of death. It's not just the dying we fear! It's the loneliness of the walk. It's the work undone and the life unfinished. It's the insecurity about whether our means and years will come out even in the end! But the voice of the Lord assures: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.*

And then there is the *voice of rage* that divides the world into friends and enemies. Someone is out to get what I have! Someone has what I deserve! Someone is going to steal my identity, my security, my values! But the voice of the Lord says: *Even in an angry, conflicted world, I will prepare a feast for you. You will be served the oil of welcome and the bottomless cup of gladness. There will be no reason to strategize anymore, for your joy will be your best defense!*

How different is that voice!

The hardest voice of all to unlearn for many of us – certainly for me! – is the *voice of guilt*. Guilt says I am unforgiven. Guilt says I have to fix the past and limit the future. Guilt says I was never enough. Guilt says I have to try harder, and longer, and I better get it right this time! Whew! What a harsh voice to listen to! But the voice of the Lord reassures me: *Goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life!* Try as I might, in the end I cannot run away from the discovery that God although I am human with human strengths and weaknesses, I was not created for condemnation. That's my stuff, not God's! When I let God's goodness and mercy catch up to me, I no longer need to live in blame. And I am able to give what I have received!

There is no greater and more challenging statement of faith than the words: *I shall not want*. Four little words: *I shall not want*. One voice among all the other voices in the world: *I shall not want*. I am enough. God is more than enough!

Mary Oliver has another poem about unlearning and learning. Looking back over her first six or seven decades of gains and losses, illusions and discoveries, she has this to say:

Let me ask you this.

Do you also think that beauty exists for some fabulous reason?

*And, if you have not been enchanted by this adventure – your life –
what would do for you?*

What I loved in the beginning, I think, was mostly myself.

Never mind that I had to, since somebody had to.

That was many years ago.

Since then I have gone out of many confinements, though with difficulty.

I mean the ones that sought to rule my heart.

I cast them out. I put them on the mush pile.

They will be nourishment somehow

(everything is nourishment somehow or other).

And I have become the child of the clouds, and hope.

I have become the friend of the enemy, whoever that is.

I have become older and, cherishing what I have learned,

I have become younger.

And what do I risk to tell you this, which is all I know?

Love yourself. Then forget it. Then, love the world. {Evidence, pp.38-39}

{Pause....}

Listen, then, to the great Psalm of Unlearning. Listen for the voice of the Lord. You will find paths of un-fear. You will be served feasts of un-rage. You will slow down and let un-guilt catch up to you. And you will tell yourself with surprise and joy: *I shall not want*. For un-wanting and free is the way of the Lord. You and I belong here. Forever.

Amen