



From the Pulpit: August 11, 2024

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

Matthew 5:39–43

Poetry Church—The Path to Kindness, II: Small Kindness

We are turning to poetry as our inspiration. Why? Maybe it's like this: Iranian-American poet Sholeh Wolpe says "The universe is one long poem. I think some of us just tap into that poem and snatch little pieces of it and translate it into words."¹

Last week, poetry led us to an invocation: *Insha'allah*, God Willing.² This week, it leads us to a shared ethic. A spiritual noticing. A possibility of human kindness. A turning toward Jesus' unshielded but persuasive love. It starts with a familiar text from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Here, with the Message translation, by Eugene Peterson.³

Here's another old saying that deserves a second look:

'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth.' Is that going to get us anywhere? Here's what I propose: 'Don't hit back at all.' If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues for the shirt off your back, gift wrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously.

And the shared spiritual ethic continues with the poem by Denusha Laméris called *Small Kindness*:

I've been thinking about the way, when you walk down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs to let you by. Or how strangers still say "bless you"

¹Chenelle, Susan. "Interview With Sholeh Wolpé (January 2005)." Accessed August 15, 2024. <https://susanchenelle.org/2009/10/10/interview-with-sholeh-wolpe-january-2005/>.

²<https://kuc.org/sermon-archive/poetry-church-the-path-to-kindness-i-inshallah/>

³Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002).

when someone sneezes, a leftover from the Bubonic plague. "Don't die," we are saying. And sometimes, when you spill lemons from your grocery bag, someone else will help you pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other.

We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot, and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile at them and for them to smile back.

*For the waitress to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder, and for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass. We have so little of each other, now. So far from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange. What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here, have my seat," "Go ahead—you first," "I like your hat."*⁴

This poem worked on me all week. I listened for strangers saying to each other "bless you"—who among us does not need this kind of extra blessing from a lesser-known passer-by? "Don't die" we are saying to one another. "May the blessing of life be upon you."

All week long, I watched the traffic: who would give themselves over to letting the other car go ahead first in this world otherwise ruled by self-interest and assertive entitlement, or at best a speedy disinterested disregard.

And what about that moment at the library, when I filled my arms with so many books they fell like lemons, spilling across the aisle, and a man 30 years my elder, stooped to help? And stooped again when I dropped two more?

⁴James Crews, ed., *The Path to Kindness: Poems of Connection and Joy*, Kindle ed. (North Adams, MA: Storey Publishing, 2022).

Jesus says “remember? The world is arranged by an-eye-for-an-eye, and a-tooth-for-a-tooth”...but it doesn’t have to be that way...try it another way...try it like this. We’d written the injunction “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” in the millennia before Jesus as a stop gap against escalation: so that when someone punches your lights out, you don’t retaliate by burning down their village. Keep it simple: an eye for an eye. Violence need not surge. Brutality need not mushroom.

So Jesus takes this ancient ethic and moves us further toward his vision for human thriving: “try it this way...turning the other cheek... try it...walking the second mile...try it...”

Jesus says, “we don’t have to escalate... we don’t have to let violence and indignities spiral and surge...try it another way.”

Or Denusha Laméris’ says “We have so little of each other now. So far from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange.”

Let us try at the very least, to say thank you to one another, bless you to one another. Let us try at the very least, to help one another in the small moments, when lemons spill across the parking lot, or when traffic piles up, and the idea of merging seems beyond impossible.

This summer when I was traveling to visit my parents in Indianapolis, my mom warned me that there was a traffic jam on my route because of a road-rage induced gun violence incident. “A 17 year old girl was driving on I-465 when someone reportedly cut her off. The girl said she honked at the driver who responded with a barrage of gunfire...bullets pierced her windshield, ripping through the drivers’ seat. She was fortunate and walked away unharmed.⁵ In 2023 there were 56 similar incidents of gunfire on Indianapolis interstates.”

Denusha notices small kindness in a world where microaggressions accelerate to previously unimaginable realms of violence.

Denusha Laméris notices small kindnesses, and it is necessary to notice because it is possible for the story to be otherwise.

Jesus says “You have heard it has been said, thou shalt love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say unto you, love your enemies.” Jesus knows the world we live in can escalate violence in a heartbeat, and the small kindnesses defray and settle the space between us, offering breathing room.

“Let us try
at the very
least, to help
one another
in the small
moments”

Poet Mary Oliver makes a similar observation, but in reverse. She says “... We are not wise, and not very often kind...” She knows that sometimes (and more often than we’d like) retaliation will backfire, violence will escalate, tensions will rise, hostilities will flare up. “We are not wise, and not very often kind.” And thus she continues,

*Still, life has some possibility left.
Perhaps this
is its way of fighting back,
that sometimes
something happens better*

*than all the riches
or power in the world. It could be anything,
but very likely you notice it in the instant
when love begins. Anyway, that’s often the
case. Anyway, whatever it is, don’t be afraid
of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb.⁶*

“Joy is not made to be a crumb.”

Mary Oliver had a bad childhood, a very bad childhood. She calls herself “one of many thousands who’ve had insufficient childhoods...” but, she says she spent a lot of time walking around the woods in Ohio... “I think it saved my life” she said “it was a very bad childhood and I escaped it, barely, with years of trouble...but I did find the entire world, in looking for something...I got saved by poetry, I got saved by the beauty of the world.”⁷

⁶Mary Oliver, *Devotions* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017), 61.

⁷Mary Oliver, “I Got Saved by the Beauty of the World,” interview by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, February 5, 2015, <https://onbeing.org/programs/mary-oliver-listening-to-the-world/>.

⁵Matt Christy, “Driver Opens Fire on Teen for Honking Her Horn on I-465, State Police Say,” *Fox 59*, March 20, 2024, <https://fox59.com/news/indycrime/driver-opens-fire-on-teen-for-honking-her-horn-on-i-465-state-police-say/>.

Someone here too had an insufficient childhood...and got saved by the beauty of the world...walking around in the woods...but it isn't just that...for some it is a meager and incomplete romance, an underwhelming career, an unfulfilled goal, some part of life inadequate or lacking, some thread-bare grief, or long season of impossible losses...and years of trouble...but in looking there, somehow the entire world in all its beauty is found: love unearthed, grace revealed, possibility stumbled upon.

"If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy" Mary Oliver says "don't hesitate. Give into it...Joy is not made to be a crumb."

One last poetry story in honor of the last day of the Paris Olympics: did you hear that there used to be a Gold Medal for Literature in the Olympics? That you could win Gold for Poetry? If you thought Live Pigeon Shooting or Pistol Dueling were odd Olympic sports, or if you like me, want the International Olympic Committee to bring back Tug-O-War, then maybe you'd also advocate for bringing back Olympic Arts like Poetry, Sculpture, Architecture, Music, and Painting?

Discontinued since 1948, these categories were originally trying to mirror the ancient Olympic Games. And despite being discontinued, an echo of poetry is still found amid the Olympic events, you just can't win the Gold for it. For example in 2008, Maya Angelou wrote a poem for the opening ceremony. In 2021 after Biles was criticized for dropping out of the race, Amanda Gorman wrote a poem for Biles saying "she never settles for less than the rebel she is. That is what it means to be Biles-bold, a beauty to behold at just 24 years old. She is such a treasure her work measures more than gold. This is the thunder, the thrill behind her throne: that power is from listening to a voice that is your own."⁸

And in 2012 a group of more than 300 poets from 204 countries gathered in London to honor the work of Olympians who gather, despite great odds, to represent their countries the poets gathered up 300 poems, each from

⁸Chloe Merrell, "Simone Biles Honoured by Amanda Gorman with Original Poem Titled: 'The Greatest,'" *Olympics*, November 17, 2021, <https://olympics.com/en/news/simone-biles-honoured-amanda-gorman-original-poem>.

their own country, and printed the poems on bookmarks, and set about making 100,000 copies of those poems, and then they put those poems in a helicopter and set them free across the Olympic stadiums. At 9 p.m. on Tuesday, June 26, 2012—100,000 poems fluttered down from the sky. People chased poems across the park. People jumped toward poems as they came within reach. Some were quite competitive about snagging descending poems. Victoriously catching a poem from the air, its own Olympic sport. One poet even said that a poem fluttered down into her lap the next day, falling from some tree or building where it had gotten stuck the day before. No gold medals were awarded, just poetry raining down from the sky across the Olympic Village.⁹

*"the way of
Jesus, who
calls us to a
peace beyond
us, a peace
that passes
human
understanding."*

Used for the 2008 opening ceremonies, Maya Angelou writes:

"Our beautiful children arrive at this
Universal stadium
They have bathed in the waters of
the world
And carry the soft silt of the Amazon,
the Nile,
The Danube, the Rhine, the Yangtze,
and the Mississippi
In the palm of their right hands...
We are here roaring and singing.
We prove that we can not only make
peace, we can bring it with us.

With respect for the world and its people,
We can compete passionately without hatred.
With respect for the world and its people,
We can take pride in the achievement of strangers.
With respect for the world and its people
We can share openly the success of friends.
Here then is the Amazement
Against the odds of impending war
In the mouth of bloody greed
Human grace and human spirit can still conqueror.
Ah...we discover, we ourselves are the amazement
which awaits
we are ourselves Amazement."¹⁰

⁹"Poetry Bomb to Drop on London," *Poetry Foundation*, originally published June 26, 2012, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetry-news/64726/poetry-bomb-to-drop-on-london>.

¹⁰Maya Angelou, *The Complete Poetry* (New York: Random House, 2015).

—Prayers of the People—
The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Maya Angelou's poem speaks across the broad goals of the Olympics: to see and remember that against all odds, despite the always-present possibility of impending war, and in the face of every human inadequacy, acknowledging every human predilection to escalate and retaliate, there is still yet a possibility for *grace* to prevail, that it is possible for a still-yet-unrealized *better* way. For us in this house that way is the way of Jesus, who calls us to a peace beyond us, a peace that passes human understanding.

And so we hear again these words of Denusha Laméris, words that remind us that possibilities arise, the human spirit prevails, and small kindnesses thread us together with love.

*I've been thinking about the way, when you walk
down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs
to let you by. Or how strangers still say "bless you"
when someone sneezes, a leftover
from the Bubonic plague. "Don't die," we are saying.
And sometimes, when you spill lemons
from your grocery bag, someone else will help you
pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other.
We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot,
and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile
at them and for them to smile back. For the waitress
to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder,
and for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass.
We have so little of each other, now. So far
from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange.
What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these
fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here,
have my seat," "Go ahead—you first," "I like your hat."*

Lord Jesus Christ, who knows our hearts, our calloused places, and worn out joints. Christ, who loves us through our frayed nerves, outrageous outbursts, and invisible tears. Lord, who calls us back from our denial, to follow you, and to serve one another in love and in humility.

Hear our deepest prayers and the cries of the world. Have mercy on those who are pressed down by forces beyond their control. Bring liberation and abundant life. Tend to the aches and injuries of those whose bodies are doing what bodies do despite the miracles of modern medicine. Heal the joints and muscles, strengthen our immunity, point to the right treatment. Let every heart beat with quality of life. Let gentleness rest on those in their last days.

Hover near the chaos and anxiety of this world when every news cycle offers a new worry. Give us wisdom and compassion, for the intractable challenges we face in a warming world, where many are forced to move but have nowhere to go. We pray without ceasing for peace in every corner of this great big globe; where our lives are intertwined with the lives of billions of others. Be especially near our own city as the convention begins tomorrow. Let there be space for different voices and perspectives. Most of all, let there be peace.

[Lord, grants us what one poet calls "a great wild goodness" that fills us with a kindness for everything. The big spider that made its way to the corner behind the couch, the dog who waits for their long walk, the neighbor whose car alarm went off again, and the one who forgot to take out the trash again.

Let us hear when the wild goodness shouts "too tame, too tame!" And respond by going outside to read poems with the stars, returning inside to eat bread in the kitchen with our loves, our gratitude making us unafraid to be happy,]*

For it's Jesus Christ, who knelt at his disciples feet, who is the source of wild goodness in a world that waits for your kingdom to come.

**The bracketed portion of this prayer is based on the poem, "A Great Wild Goodness" by Annie Lighthart*

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