



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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Do You Speak the Language? John 2:1-11, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

One of my inspirations passed away this week.

On Thursday afternoon, along with millions of other lovers of poetry around the world, I learned that 83-year-old Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Mary Oliver, had died at her home in Florida. Tributes and remembrances immediately began pouring out over news articles, blogs, and social media, as people recalled their favorite poems and when they were first touch by her work.

Oliver was known for her clear, uncomplicated style which uncovers seemingly limitless layers of imagery and ideas from the natural world. Her reverence for the beauty of creation and her ability to pull deep meaning from everything around her prompts her reader to slow down and notice the subtle colors in every blade of grass, the mesmerizing whirl of an insect's wings, the breathtaking beauty of every daisy or willow, or the enchanting song of the mockingbird. In her poem called "Sometimes," she summarized what she seemed to understand as her calling: "Instructions for living a life: Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it."¹

I doubt any among us would ever think of Mary Oliver as a prophet or apostle, and I know little of her personal faith convictions save what she expressed in her work, but she so clearly "speaks by the Spirit of God" to me, to use Paul's phrase from today's passage in 1 Corinthians. Though her writing became more obviously theological in her later years, even the poems that make no explicit reference to the divine express a deep reverence for the artistry of the Creator, a wonder in the miracle of life, and the humility of one who lived to discover meaning and embrace mystery. It seems to me that this is precisely what it means to "speak by the Spirit of God." It also seems that Mary Oliver was taken from us just when our world needs her voice the most.

For those of us who grew up in church or who have been students of the Bible, we may associate the language of faith with pulpit-pounding, hellfire and brimstone sermons or with complex and lofty theological terms. While these may be the

¹Mary Oliver, "Sometimes," in *Red Bird* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), 37.

language of religion, or in some cases, of the Church, and certainly have their proper place in teaching and preaching *about* God, the more I pray and worship and pay attention to the places I see God at work in the world, the more I'm convinced that these are not necessarily the language which the Spirit of God speaks.

Or as Mary Oliver writes:

I know a lot of fancy words,
I tear them from my heart and my tongue
Then I pray.
Lord God, mercy is in your hands, pour me a little. And tenderness, too.
My need is great.²

As hard as we may try, our “fancy words” can never define God or capture the totality of God’s presence, nor can we analyze the work of God’s Spirit until we can fully comprehend it, and it would be arrogant folly for us to believe that we could. But when we “speak by the Spirit of God,” we grasp that the language of the Spirit can take the form of a simple prayer from the heart or a sincere question in the mind. We learn to speak the language of the Spirit when we speak simply and honestly to God and listen openly and fervently for God.

In Oliver’s poem called, “Praying,” we read these instructions:

It doesn’t have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don’t try
to make them elaborate, this isn’t
a contest but the doorway
into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.³

The language of the Spirit can be found in the silence of our own souls or in the breeze which brushes our cheeks. It can be heard in the poet’s verse that pricks our hearts or the playwright’s line that opens our spirits. It can be felt in the rhythms of music that breathe life into our weary souls, is seen in the brush strokes that pray in color and light, and is woven into every stitch of a prayer shawl knit for someone who is ill.

²Mary Oliver, “Six Recognitions of the Lord,” in *Thirst* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 26.

³Mary Oliver, “Praying,” in *Thirst* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 131.

The language of the Spirit soars in the laughter of delighted children, whispers in the intimate conversations of friends, and embraces with hands outstretched in hospitality. I have been reminded this week through the gift of Mary Oliver’s poetry that the Spirit of God will not be contained or controlled by the limits of what my language can explain or my mind can comprehend or the boundaries of my comfort zones. And she reminds me that the presence of the Spirit is a grace that I do not have to be good enough to earn or clever enough to understand. She writes:

Another morning and I wake with thirst
for the goodness I do not have. I walk
out to the pond and all the way God has
given us such beautiful lessons. Oh Lord,
I was never a quick scholar but sulked
and hunched over my books past the
hour and the bell; grant me, in your
mercy, a little more time. Love for the
earth and love for you are having such a
long conversation in my heart. Who
knows what will finally happen or
where I will be sent, yet already I have
given a great many things away, expecting
to be told to pack nothing, except the
prayers which, with this thirst, I am
slowly learning.⁴

We have no evidence from Scripture that Jesus was a poet or a musician, but since we as Christians understand him to be One with the Creator God and the Holy Spirit—that is he, in fact, *the* Word of God, the Logos by which God brought forth the creation—we know through Jesus’ words and actions, God has spoken most clearly. In our Gospel lesson, we heard the story of Jesus turning water into wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. Though we often refer to this as Jesus’ first miracle, it stands apart from most of his other miraculous works where he met direct needs of suffering people by feeding or healing them. Here, however, John doesn’t call what Jesus has done a “miracle,” but rather a “sign.” After Jesus is baptized and calls his first disciples, the first act John reports is this sign which “revealed his glory” and caused his disciples to believe in him. When Jesus wanted to give his followers some hint of what his ministry would be and his coming would mean, he chose an occasion of celebration, and he transformed jugs of ordinary water into an abundance of the finest wine, a symbol of life and blessing and divine presence.

Throughout his ministry, when Jesus wanted to give his followers a glimpse of God’s kingdom, he didn’t present a thesis or bolster his argument with facts and

⁴Mary Oliver, “Thirst,” in *Thirst* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 69.

figures, and only rarely did he preach a sermon. No, he almost always told a story, often a parable that painted a picture, a story that used metaphor and symbol to spark the hearers' imaginations, and one that left plenty of room for question and mystery.

"It is possible, I suppose, that sometime we will learn everything there is to learn: what the world is, for example, and what it means," Mary Oliver writes in her poem "Daisies," as she describes the song of the mockingbird who "either knows enough already or knows enough to be perfectly content not knowing. Song being born of quest he knows this:" she writes, "he must turn silent were he suddenly assaulted with answers."⁵

I suspect that Jesus calls us, like the mockingbird, to be "content not knowing," perhaps because the answers would be too much of an assault on our creaturiness for us to handle, but perhaps just as much because it is in the journey of quest that the song of our life is composed.

By now, those of you who are not poets, painters, or pianists may be getting worried, so let me put your fears at ease: It is not that the creative geniuses among us have a corner on the market in "speaking by the Spirit of God," and it is not that all art, in its many forms, is necessarily holy. In fact, the Apostle Paul, who is far more preacher and theologian than poet, is the one in Scripture who writes most often about the vast array and marvelous variety of gifts which are all granted and empowered by God's Spirit. In today's passage from 1 Corinthians, for example, we find that wisdom and knowledge, faith, healing, prophecy, and discernment are all included. In other passages, Paul lists serving, teaching, encouraging, giving, leadership, and showing mercy (Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:28).

Though the artists and creative types among us may speak in a different dialect than that of the bankers and business people, of physicians, lawyers, and educators, of factory workers and farmers, all who are intentional about slowing down to listen for God's voice, leaving room for humility and mystery, doing the work of discovering one's gifts, and putting those gifts to work for the Kingdom of God are, in fact, speaking the language of the Spirit. And Paul will go on to say that no one, not a single person, not a single gift, is any more or less important. It takes all of us, every person and every gift, for the community of faith to function as God intends and the work of the kingdom to be accomplished. How those gifts are "activated," how we are all used of God and fit together to accomplish God's purposes in the world is part of the mystery and is the work of God alone. That we are ready and willing to pay attention and to use the gifts we have been given is entirely up to us.

⁵Mary Oliver, "Daisies," in *Why I Wake Early* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 65.

In the fall of 2000, Mark and I had an opportunity to travel to Kiev, Ukraine, as part of a delegation from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship to establish a missions partnership with Ukrainian Baptists. This partnership would eventually establish the Village of Hope, a foster care community housed in a former Soviet youth camp, that would provide housing, education, and a supportive family environment for some of the thousands of orphans and street children in Kiev. In this period between the fall of the Soviet Union and the start of the war with Russia, Ukraine was becoming a thriving democracy with bustling cities heavily influenced by western commerce and culture and a proud people working to rebuild their nation and recover their Ukrainian identity.

Our visit coincided with the quadrennial national assembly of Ukrainian Baptists, where hundreds of representatives from Baptist bodies across Europe, Asia, and North America had gathered in Kiev to celebrate the country's newfound freedom to establish churches and seminaries, to build relationships, and to offer support and resources for our Baptist brothers and sisters in Ukraine.

For the worship services, those of us who did not speak Ukrainian were given headsets so that we could hear the voice of an interpreter to translate the sermons and reports, but when we sang, we all raised our voices together in our various languages. During the closing service, as we sang the hymn that we will sing here in just a few minutes, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," the dozens of languages and faith traditions blended perfectly into one great chorus of praise. It was one of the most beautiful experiences of my life of faith and remains one of the most meaningful to this day. Though we were singing in many different languages that day, we were all surely speaking the language of the Spirit.

I said earlier that Mary Oliver was not a prophet. Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps in the fullest sense, hers was a prophetic voice calling us to open our eyes and look around us, to slow down enough to notice what we see, to appreciate the magnificent diversity of the creation and of our human family, and to be mindful enough to reflect on the beauty around us and the gifts within us. Much like Paul, perhaps her calling was to summon the rest of us to listen for the voice of God and learn to speak the language of the Spirit so that we can interpret it, through our own lives, for the rest of the world.

Paul's words tell us of the gifts of the Spirit and asks us how we will allow God to use those gifts to speak in us and through us. Mary Oliver, also speaking by the Spirit of God, challenges us, "Tell me," she asks, "what is it that you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"⁶

⁶Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day," in *House of Light* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 60.

Lord of heaven and earth, as we consider the work of your hands, the majesty of your creation, we are awed that the Creator of all that we see and know and of things that we cannot even imagine, is also the God who breathed life into us and who knows us intimately and cares for us deeply. Your creation gives witness to your love of diversity and beauty, to your imagination and your faithfulness. Although we cannot fully comprehend it, we know that the mightiest mountains and oceans to the tiniest of creatures all reflect your glory, and your Word tells us that you sustain us and all of your creation as a loving Mother nurtures her children. We praise you, O God, that you have given us the gift of this beautiful planet we inhabit and the responsibility to care for it. We praise you that through our work and worship and play, you have allowed us to learn and grow and prosper. We praise you that you have given us one another for encouragement and companionship along this journey of life. Teach us, O Lord, to be trustworthy caretakers of these great gifts.

But we confess, O Lord, that too often we are careless with your gifts to us. Give us the wisdom not to squander or abuse the resources of this world but to be the stewards you have called us to be. Grant us the grace not to neglect the gift of our relationships with one another but to show mercy and compassion as we follow the example of Jesus our Lord. Give us the courage to stand against injustice wherever it exists and to recognize the dignity and worth in every person. Grant us patience and diligence and creativity as we work for healing and peace around the world, throughout our community, and in our own lives. So fill us with your love, O Lord, that we reflect your image in all circumstances and for all people. We offer this and all our prayers in the name of Christ who is our strength for today and our hope for all the days to come. Amen.