

Sermon “Married to Amazement” – Reverend Sharon K. Dittmar

Title: Married to Amazement

Blurb: The wheel of life turns. Summer passes and autumn beckons. This is true within and without. In the autumn of the year and my life I am uncovering new and/or buried truths, turning once again. Strangely (or perhaps not strange at all?) I am called back to this line from the poet Mary Oliver, “When it is all over, I want to say all my life I was a bride married to amazement.” What does it mean to be married to amazement? How can we retain this essence regardless of season of life as well as heartbreak and hope, and what do we receive when we do?

Bio: Reverend Dittmar graduated from Harvard Divinity School in 1997. She served one year as Interim Minister at the Gathering at Northern Hills (Cincinnati, OH 1997-1998), and eighteen years as Minister at First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati (1998-2016). In 2016 she began work as Congregational Life Field Staff with the MidAmerica Region.

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Opening words

“Invitation”

Shel Silverstein

If you are a dreamer, come in,
 If you are a dreamer, a wisher, a liar,
 A hope-er, a pray-er, a magic bean buyer
 If you're a pretender, come sit by my fire
 For we have some flax-golden tales to spin.
 Come in!
 Come in!

Opening Hymn

Teal Hymnal #1010 “We Give Thanks” or
 Grey Hymnal #389 “Gathered Here”

**Note on the reading – the language of When Death Comes is gendered. I would introduce it by saying, “the following is a wonderful poem by Mary Oliver. The language is gendered so I invite you to edit it for yourself in the most meaningful, supportive, and celebratory way possible.”*

Reading

*“When Death Comes”

Mary Oliver

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox;

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

Sermon

I choose to be a bride married to amazement.

I chose other ideas first. I tried preparing for the worst. That's an oldie and goodie from my childhood. Interestingly, it didn't protect me from what could and did go wrong. Turns out I was not imaginative enough. Beyond that, it was exhausting and depressing, remaining vigilant, focused on doomed, potential futures. After that I tried denial and that got me into flat out trouble, not attending to the obvious and necessary. Much later, I chose a middle way, aware of the valley of loss and pain on one side (always with us),

and every gift and opportunity on the other side. Also always with us. Between them rests the middle, a chosen path of present wonder, gratitude, and amazement.

One thing I learned serving in parish ministry for 19 years is that as the great Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel said in his *Yom Kippur* essay, “Scratch the skin of any person and you come upon sorrow, frustration, unhappiness. People are pretentious. Everybody looks proud; inside he is heartbroken.”

From the inside seat of parish ministry, I watched apparently successful members, and their families struggle with life threatening illnesses, addiction, affairs, financial ruin, traumatic injury and accidents, dementia, even the death of children (which I will never understand). It all can happen. I have been with people as it all happened. And it was from this seat with these teachers, journeying with them, that I learned I could never prepare for all the possibilities, nor know which ones to expect when, if ever, might become part of my personal story.

Early in my ministry I visited an older couple in the hospital. You must imagine baby minister me, 30 years old, no gray hairs, not yet ordained, in a chaplain residency program. The woman said to me looking at her dying husband, “How could this happen to us! We were missionaries.” I remember simultaneously realizing death is inevitable and uncontrollable, a hungry bear in autumn, and that no good works, nor benevolent God offers immortality in this life. I also realized looking into her grieving face, that there was nothing for me to say other than “I am sorry. This must be very hard for you.”

Bad things happen to good people and wonderful things happen to people who behave very badly. From this have I concluded that neither I, nor anyone else is fully in control. Rather we are in a river of life and there are floods, droughts, lazy calm days, and seasonal changes. We can put up some guardrails, like life insurance, wills, health insurance. We can ask for help as often as we need it, even to the “annoyance” of medical providers, therapists, and financial planners. But when the lights go out, when the hungry bear comes, we will not have prepared for everything. Attempting to be fully prepared is just exhausting. It requires constant, depressing vigilance, imagining future harms. It is a hard, deadening way to live, and a great way to ruin the possibly beautiful now.

A few years ago, I took part in a local Leadership program. We were asked to do an exercise that I hated. We were instructed to walk around, to 30 people we had just met, look them in the eye and say either “I trust you” or “I don’t trust you.” I know neither the benefit nor purpose of this exercise. I certainly remember its multiple cringeworthy moments and the response of one classmate. This classmate, the shortest man in the class, one who could be considered “vulnerable” given his size, who had to look up to look everyone in the eye, said, “I trust you.”

When the instructor later asked him why he did this he replied, “It doesn’t matter if I trust you. I trust myself and I trust myself to figure it out, so I trust you.” He changed the frame of the entire exercise to empower himself. Much later I learned that he grew up as

an immigrant in a biracial family amidst poverty and multiple challenges and then made a series of mistakes, like we do, and he figured it out. These days he does not waste time remaining vigilant and worrying about the future. He chooses to name his frame, and believes that when problems arise, he will figure them out. So, he chooses to live loud and proud in the present and have fun. This is a choice he makes, not based on ignorance, but knowledge and commitment to the present. It is amazing to me how one awkward exercise could unexpectedly teach me the importance of choosing my own frame.

What I learned from all these teachers is to love the now, dig deeply into it, savor it, make time for fun, family, friends, building community, living into one's own joy. When I became a minister, I used to see this quote by the writer and literature professor, Joseph Campbell, everywhere I turned, "Follow your bliss." I don't see this quote on walls anymore, but Campbell was on to something. In the words of theologian and civil rights leader Howard Thurman, "Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

What makes me come alive is wonder and I find it in the present, the eternal now.

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I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
 if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
 I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
 or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

I want to be a bride married to amazement, the groom taking the world in my arms.

I don't want to simply visit the world. I want to go out and submerge myself in its wonder. When I go out walking, I do a simple exercise taught to me by my colleague Reverend Phil Lund. I consider sight, sound, smell, sense, sky, and stance. I look at my surroundings, I listen, I inhale deeply, I feel the air on my skin (is it humid, crisp, cold), I look at the sky, and feel my body. Please, if you try this, adapt this exercise to whatever level of mobility and sensory function available to you.

I used to walk with my head down, lost in thought – generally about the past or future. With this exercise I am in the present. I smell rain in the air, or decaying earth that lets me know summer is ending. I experience the quality of the air. I see the leaves change, drop, and bud with new flowers in the springtime. When walking with me one needs to put up with my shouts of delight at things I see, hear, touch, smell, feel. I notice how my body feels – stiff, flexible, uneven. Sometimes when I check my stance, I find I am limping. When this happens I check in more deeply with how it is with my body. And at least once on every walk I look up to the sky. Is it clear blue, fully overcast, foggy grey, or are there puffy evening clouds with a breakthrough last pink shaft of light?

It is when I look at the sky that I am filled with the most wonder and I think of what a gift it is to be alive and how everything changes. Every walk is a new discovery, a new adventure, even if it is on the same path. And I am reminded that every moment passes, every moment, the bad ones, and even the good ones, the great ones too. This has taught me to be more grateful for what is, and to remember that nothing lasts, so honor now, and give and receive love where I find it. I remind myself nothing is given and reach out for what is now.

I don't want to mislead you into thinking that because I choose wonder, it is all wonderful all the time. I have losses and grief too. I wake sometimes in the night unable to sleep. I am scared about the state of American democracy, and the war in Ukraine. I worry about deforestation and species extinction, armed rebels in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the over incarceration of black, brown, and poor people in the United States, and my spectacularly crabby and failing mother. While writing this sermon, amid writing this sermon, I learned that a dear friend from long ago had died. Someone who changed my life for good is now gone. I too am scared. I too am heart broken.

Nineteenth century essayist and philosopher Henry David Thoreau wrote about wanting to “suck out all the marrow of life.” For him this included living a quiet, self-reliant life on Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. My definition is a bit different, but I too understand wanting to suck the marrow out of life in my own chosen way. I recently watched a video by slam poet Andrea Gibson. In it they speak of going home with a woman and before their first kiss, the woman runs to get a stethoscope so that Andrea can hear the woman’s heart beat faster as they kiss. This story is so beautiful to me. What a delightful way to suck the marrow out of life with one kiss. It is so present to the moment, so simple, so possible. So blissful, so alive.

Here is a tweet from Andrea Gibson from just last week *“Awkwardness is my new drug of choice. Nothing gets me higher than uncomfortable situations. In today’s newsletter I wrote about how I’ve been on a mission to embarrass myself regularly. Have a beautifully awkward day, everyone.”* (Heart emoji). Her newsletter from September 13 contains this story:

Years ago on tour in Europe, my friends and I dared our friend Katie to walk through a crowded travel plaza with a 20 foot strand of toilet paper dragging from her shoe, complaining loudly in a deep midwestern accent about how there was “No place in the world good as America.” She made a humiliating spectacle of herself. We were high on that embarrassment for days.

There are so many ways to live in wonder, in bliss, to be alive as the world collides around us. I hope for each of us, take care during the hard times, reach for the present wonder as often possible, maybe even experiment with humiliating spectacle and awkwardness. However you do it, make it a great day. May it always be so.

Closing Hymn

Teal Hymnal #1024 “When the Spirit Says Do”
Grey Hymnal #38 “Morning Has Broken”

Benediction

Go out into the world in peace
Have Courage
Hold on to what is good
Return to no person evil for evil

Strengthen the fainthearted
Support the weak
Help the suffering
Honor all persons