

The Language of Flowers

April 8, 2012

Rev. Dr. Mark Belletini

**Greeting, Centering
Kindling
Opening Words**

We are here
on bright Easter morning
during the week of Passover
to celebrate that we are alive
and that our joy in life
is to blossom together in love.

And so, without guarantees, we lean into joy, and bend toward a just way of life, both for our own sakes, and for the sake of our children and all beings with whom we share the earth. We would engage our mission wholeheartedly, with courage, self-questioning, compassion, vulnerability and honesty.

Singing: Oh We Give Thanks

Story for the Children
(most of which is found again in the sermon so is not printed here)

Music, News and Caring Cards

Easter Exultet for 2012:
*You must become brother and sister
to each and every thing,
so that they flow through you,
dissolving every difference
between what belongs to you and to others.
No star, no petal shall fall...
you will fall with them
to rise again
in every new beginning.*

Herman Hesse 1908

Hymn #27 with flower procession to the table

Sequence
Mystery not to be solved,
like some detective story.

Mystery not to be dreaded,
like sudden news that a friend is missing.
Mystery not to be mystified all the more,
like a creaking floorboard in an old house.
Mystery not to be feared,
like a hungry roar in the middle of a dark forest.
But a mystery to be lived,
this life of ours...
unexpected!
something rather than nothing!
A mystery to be lived:
red-bud branches aflame in the air,
apple flower petals floating on the wind,
shooting stars streaking green at night across the path of the full moon,
the chirp of early birds,
the purr of a cat in a lap,
the wag of a dog's tail,
the giggle of a child,
mysteries to be savored,
women and men and children
moving toward lives made just and free;
life! life!
mysteries to be celebrated, loved,
life! life! life!
mystery that is majesty,
mystery that drops some to their knees,
lifts others in dance or loud outcries;
mystery that is not, of need,
devalued by the mere reality of death,
or the unfairness of sorrows.
Life! Life! Life! Life!...
Mystery too often cloaked until revealed
in the many beating hearts
of this community of support
and strength and spirit;
mystery that sometimes plays hide and seek
Life! Life! Life! Life! Life...
until we pause to notice
the reflection of our own heart
in the untroubled mirror
of these gathered flowers,
and this simple silence....

silence

Mystery, life, something rather than nothing!
Our somethings, *our* particulars, *our* lives...
in this safe and sacred moment,

we can name aloud, or in the shelter of our hearts, the names of those whose lives changed our own: those whom we miss, those who bless our memories, those with whom we struggle sometimes, or those whom we love with tenderness, or who love us in tenderness.

naming

Mystery! Life! life! life! Oh that certain intervals between notes, and certain harmonies, and the vibrations in instrument and neck and chest can blossom inside the human heart, mystery within mystery. Life itself made more alive, rising more vividly within us than it was before the music.

Anthem

The First Reading *is taken from a series of poems*

composed in Spanish and English by Juan Pablo Gutierrez in 2011 to accompany watercolors of flowers painted by my good friend Kevin Woodson, whom a number of you met, or remember when he created that wonderful curtain of paper human beings hanging from the screen some years back. Their combined book is called The Language of the Flowers. These words are parts of two different poems.

In passing, we wave to you,
from public spaces,
from empty lots,
from abandoned sites,
from wealthy gardens,
from churches,
from pagan rituals,
from atheist gardens,
from street corners,
on side walks,
in makeshift altars....
the gentle folds became clear syllables,
the colors suddenly become action verbs,
pistils like antennas,
communicating sentences
without punctuation marks.
I turn the page again,
finding a new awakening...
everywhere I turned,
another page appeared
as I continued to learn
the language of the flowers.

The Second Reading *is a perfect piece for today called simply, Flowers, written by Linda Pastan, in 1995.*

Someone I love is getting married,
and I am composing poems about flowers, hyacinths
and lilacs, as if there were something

intrinsically bridal about these outgrowths of the plant flaunting itself,
attracting insects and birds
to the exact and fragrant place of pollen.

And someone I love is dying.
Flowers will be wanted for her too,
lilies perhaps, though all that is required
is a handful of good dirt on a plain pine box,
and all the funeral bouquets will be sent
to a hospital somewhere, where the sick will wake

one morning to a confusion of scents.
I wonder, partly in innocence,
why everything seems to mean something else,
and I marvel at how we comfort
ourselves and each other with the fragile
symptoms of beauty, with petals

of roses for love, with snowdrops for hope,
whether we are setting out on a journey
or simply waving goodbye from the dock
as the ship pulls out and a wake of tossed flowers
floats for a little while, delicate as foam
on the water, before it disappears.

Sermon:

In a stroke of remarkable Easter-sermon luck, I just read this week about a flower that Russian scientists "resurrected." The one I mentioned to the children this morning. A seed of a *silene stenophylla* that was lost in a squirrel's den 30,000 years ago, (!) then frozen in the permafrost, was found by scientists and then planted in modern soil. It grew, blossomed and produced new seeds that will grow into other *silene stenophylla* with lovely and quite delicate white flowers.

A "resurrected" flower, the newspapers called it. The word *resurrected*, of course, is from the media, not the scientists who found the seed. The media clearly tried to put a holiday topical spin on the whole amazing event. The particular newspaper I read suggested that if we could restore an ancient flower, why not resurrect a woolly mammoth as well, thus restoring an extinct species from some fleshy sample frozen in a snowdrift in Siberia.

I suppose that is what a lot of folks believe the word "resurrection" means. The restoration, of a body that was dead, as the exact person that was there before death. And indeed, some of the later gospel stories seem to imply that, since in these stories, the post Easter Jesus walks around showing people the nail holes in his arms, thus proving that he was the same Jesus who was killed by the Roman prefect Pilate's militia a few days earlier.

But wouldn't you know it? The very *earliest* proclaimer of the Easter resurrection *denied* such a clumsy interpretationclearly, plainly and passionately. Paul of Tarsus wrote about this resurrection business quite a lot. Now you must know that only *parts* of six letters of the 12 found

in the New Testament are authentically his. The additions by later church folks telling women to be quiet have given Paul a pretty bad reputation, understandably. The later Christians altered Paul's radically inclusive ideas because they wanted to fit into Roman society, which was decidedly sexist all the way. No women senators. No women soldiers. No women poets. And no women religious leaders except for the Vestal Virgins, a small symbolic group. But you'll find none of that sexist foolishness in the few words that have come down to us which are authentically his. Scholars are doing an amazing job these days restoring an ancient personality, undoing his wrecked reputation, and clarifying his urgent message.

Here is what he wrote to some folks in the Greek city of Korinthos, probably in the spring of the year 54: *(this is my edition of the Eugene Peterson version of this letter, which is very contemporary in language)*

"Now some skeptic is sure to ask 'How does resurrection work? Give me a picture, draw me a diagram. What does a resurrected body look like?' If you look at the question closely, you realize how absurd it is. There are no diagrams or pictures describing this. But we do have a parallel experience in gardening. You plant a "dead" seed, and soon there is a flourishing plant. But there is no visual similarity between the seed and the flower, is there? You could never guess what an apple blossom is going to look like by staring at that little teardrop shaped seed inside the apple, right? What we plant in the soil and what comes out of it are dramatically different. The planting of a seed and rising of a live flower are a mere sketch at best, but perhaps this will help you to approach the mystery of what I mean by resurrection."

And to some folks in Rome he wrote this good news in the spring or fall of 56: *"Remember, you've been raised from the dead. A whole, healed, put-together life right now, with more and more life on the way."*

What? Who's been raised from the dead? Jesus? No, the people he was writing to in Rome, people who had not died in any mortal sense. That's what he wrote, and it's even more striking to me than his, "A seed doesn't look like a flower any more than a resurrection body looks like the person who died."

These ancient passages, written long before the gospels, completely undo for me the very common and populist assumptions that *resurrection* means the resuscitation of some cold corpse, or, lately, growing a 30,000 year old seed into a 21st century flower that looks exactly like those flowers used to look like millennia ago.

Paul used the growth of a tiny dark seed into that brightly colored blossom to proclaim his idea that there *was* a resurrection of some sort after Jesus died. But for Paul, it was not the kind of resurrection that portrays Jesus as a restored fleshy being rising out of a tomb with a roll-away stone. Paul knows of no such story, and so he uses the image of a seed growing into a flower to speak of the language of life.

The poet Juan Pablo Gutierrez also tells us that flowers speak a language. Everywhere they grow and blossom, he proclaims with detail. *In passing, we wave to you*, he writes: *from public spaces, from empty lots, from abandoned sites, from wealthy gardens, from churches, from pagan rituals, from atheist gardens, from street corners, on side walks, in makeshift altars....* That's quite a broad and diverse list of places where flowers might be found! Then later in his book, Juan Pablo begins

to speak in grammatical terms...he speaks of *clear syllables, action verbs, sentences without punctuation marks*. All examples of language, of speech, of communication. He sees the diverse gatherings of flowers around the neighborhood as a colorful text on the page of life: *I turn the page again, finding a new awakening...(might one not also say resurrection?) as I continued to learn the language of the flowers*.

Poet Linda Pastan speaks of the language of flowers too...referring to the old Victorian notion that different kinds of flowers express different ideas and emotions: *with petals of roses for love, with snowdrops for hope*. (In Victorian days, when so many emotions were considered impolitic for public expression, there existed a code for the meaning of flowers that people might wear in their hair or on their lapel, proclaiming their romantic feelings for this person or that.)

Pastan mentions weddings, where flowers speak of love even if there are only three people gathered in Slowter Lounge for the ceremony. And she speaks of funerals too. Believe me, the gorgeous flowers sent by the Board of this church when my mother died spoke loud and clearly of care and love and understanding to me. I didn't need a translator from Victorian times one bit.

Linda Pastan even mentions the sailing of ocean liners, where people sometimes toss flowers of farewell on the foam of those travelling away from home.

Juan Pablo list goes a lot further than Linda Pastan's, composing individual poems for well over 40 distinct flowers in his book, assigning them meanings and speech: the magnolia signs faithful relationships, the calla lily (or Alcatraz in Spanish) speaks of sexuality; the quince (some gorgeous blossoms are blooming beautifully by the rear parking lot of this building, near the bicycle racks) speaks of journeys, since the seed of the quince journeyed from China to Arabia, all the way to "this garden." Jasmine flowers, he says, speak of the goddess, and cherry blossoms are the yearly proclamation of spring.

Clearly flowers are a rich invitation to considerations and dimensions of life. My friend Kevin's amazing spiritual practice...at least as I define that phrase... is to watercolor some local flower in his local neighborhood most every single morning, rain or shine, out in Oakland where he lives. Or in Barcelona or Prague or Taiwan if he happens to be traveling to one of *their* neighborhoods for work. By now he has painted a thousand flowers at least. All of them speaking to me of nature's sheer extravagance, and of a thousand other meanings, flower by flower.

And in our own tradition, we celebrate with flowers...not just every Sunday up here on our focal table, but especially today on Easter, when we celebrate the Flower Ceremony of Norbert Capek. Capek, like Juan Pablo, felt that flowers speak too, speak of inherent value in *the beautiful diversity in beautiful community*. For him, they were more eloquent than the spoken word. His congregation in Prague of a couple of thousand people couldn't have agreed more, continuing to celebrate this rite, as we also do in our congregation, 70 years after he was put to death in Dachau by the Nazis for refusing to deny the radical message of the flowers.

The language of the *silene stenophylla* restored by Russian scientists may speak too, but I assure you, it is not offering us new theological language about the meaning of Easter. It does speak, though, of the brilliance of the scientists who discovered and planted the seed, and it speaks eloquently of an earlier age on this earth. It even speaks of beauty. But the flower wasn't really "resurrected" in the way the media are trying to portray it.

In fact, trying to bring back what lived long ago will often not work at all, even if we could pull off more spectacular "Jurassic Park" types of restoration. The giant dragonfly from the Permian era I mentioned to the children this morning, should it be restored by some very clever scientist, would die again not long after it was brought back to life. The oxygen level back in Permian days was far, far richer than in our own era, and insects, because of the way they take in oxygen, may indeed grow large in such an atmosphere; but they will stay small in our own era because our oxygen percentage in 2012 is so much less.

Even if Jesus, for example, was brought back literally in the flesh, like some folks seem to believe he was (and despite Paul's clear denial of that idea), he wouldn't last long either. His teachings spoke the language of peasant agriculture. We now have agribusiness. They addressed a culture of Roman oppression which no longer exists, although God knows oppression still exists in other forms. Some of his words would not make any obvious sense in our day and age, because the cultural context is entirely different. And anyway, anyone like Jesus walking around and daring to suggest...out loud... that people would benefit from sharing *with* each other, and listening *to* each other, and anyone suggesting that the 99% and 1% we hear about exemplifies very bad and unfair odds wouldn't live very long anyway. He wouldn't need a Pilate or a Roman recruit to do the job...he'd be ridiculed to death on a cross of sarcasm on Fox News in about five minutes, as soon as he opened his mouth. Or considering what is going on at the OSU campus these last few weeks, someone might just paint a swastika on his forehead and shoot him between the eyes with their quite legal concealed firearm... for being a Jew.

No, who we are is part and parcel of our era and age. We can't just live at any time, in any place and be ourselves. We are not separate from our culture, environment, age or location. Paul was right....the seed of Jesus buried in the ground (or for that matter, the seed of Moses, or Gandhi, or Susan B. Anthony, or Lydia Marie Child or Martin Luther King...all equally buried in the ground) once planted, will grow into something that doesn't look like them at all. It will probably look, in fact, a lot like us, we who live now, who are alive in this culture, we who, as Paul might say, have risen already, with more life on the way; we who have to respond, not to issues that haven't been around since the last Caesar died, but to the issues of our *own* day... with fierce honesty, vibrant spirit, and studied resistance on behalf of justice for all. It makes absolutely no sense, just as the gospel angel scolded the people looking for Jesus in his grave, "to seek the living among the dead." No, you seek the living among the living.

Lydia Marie Child, one of the greatest proponents of the wisdom of diversity in community in the 19th century, thought that the flowers she saw growing around her were just like those gospel angels proclaiming that powerful message in their hieroglyphic language. I agree. Here before us is a whole table-full of angels.

The great John Muir, one of most articulate nature mystics the world has ever known, wondered why Moses wanted to see more Glory, that is, "see God face to face." If he had seen the sky and flowers around California, Muir mused, he might have thought better of such a request. What's more glorious than flowers? he wonders.

But Moses, according to the story, had already seen the glory that Capek's flowers would one day proclaim, that Lydia Child's flowers would one day proclaim, that Paul would one day proclaim, namely, that a community of oppressed and trampled people can rise up and boldly bud in an act of

resistance and freedom. The "more glory" that Moses wanted to see was simply for them to accept their freedom and stop whining about how difficult freedom is. Moses lived all of his life waiting for those buds to bloom fully. He died and never saw it, nothing, as the scripture says, but "the back-parts" of the Glory of God. Jesus died and never saw his vision of a more just world come to pass.

But we're alive. We're not like that Siberian flower, grown from a seed which survived in the cold from life long ago. We're more like these flowers, on the table before us, a mortal community of diversity, in the common vessel of our culture, blossoming not yesterday, but today, not in some other time or place, but here and now. Risen and alive, not dead. Not just on Easter, but everyday.

Offering:

What is written on the page of tomorrow cannot be read. Nor can we predict every turn and surprise that comes our way. Yet we bless our days to come with strength and welcome, by offering of our substance for the common good. Some give in more electronic ways, others prefer this ancient way. In all cases, what we give, we give freely as a tangible sign that our ancient free tradition celebrates life, rises to restore all that has been fractured, and resists coercion in all matters of the spirit. The morning offering is now given and received.

Consecration of the Flowers

words of Norbert Capek, adapted

Jolinda Stevens, Religious Education Director

Spirit of Life, let these flowers speak to us this morning, of our lives here upon the earth. Our lives beneath the sun, beneath the rain, beneath the falling petals and falling stars.

EAST May they speak to us, amid diversities of gifts, and diversities of knowledge, and feeling, to find strength in our differences, and unity in our common, desire to live just and happy lives.

SOUTH May they speak to us of the value of true friendship, where we may share the realities of our hidden heart, and support each other.

WEST May they speak to us by offering us a portrait of a cherished community, where distinctions are expressions of beauty, not sources of anxiety.

NORTH May we never compete with each other, but cooperate together to build a future of peace, justice and freedom for all. Let these flowers speak their truth to us: that it is not important what we look like, or whether our efforts are great or small at any given time, but that nevertheless, all of us are in this together.

EVERYONE (LED BY JOLINDA) Breathe in the flowers of love. Join your heart to the hearts of all who suffer. Let wounds heal, and eyes shine again with joy. (words from a Flower Ceremony hymn by Norbert Capek)