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"Consider the Lilies"

A sermon by Mark E. Diehl

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Matthew 6:25-30

In 2003, the author Anne Lamott was invited to give the commencement address to the graduating class of the University of California at Berkeley. Not many are afforded such an honor, nor are given such a lofty soapbox to influence the next generation of leaders.

Anne was an unlikely choice. As she stated to the gathered crowd that day, "This must be a magical day for you. I wouldn't know. I accidentally forgot to graduate from college. I meant to, 30 years ago, but things got away from me. I did graduate from high school, though—do I get partial credit for that?" She went on to explain that at her high school graduation, when she opened the envelope holding her diploma, it was empty. Her father had forgotten to pay a book bill at school. All that was inside the envelope was, as Anne put it, a "ransom note that said, 'See Mrs. Foley, the bookkeeper, if you ever want to see your diploma alive again.'"

Anne Lamott is a wonderful novelist and non-fiction writer. Her subjects mirror her own struggle through poverty, drug-addiction, parenting, love, and coming to faith. As one reviewer has stated, "Lamott is like so many of us, but she lives out loud on paper. She helps us see that we're not alone, no matter how screwed up we might feel" (The My Hero Project, Inc., www.myhero.com).

Perhaps that is why the choice of Anne to speak to the graduating class at Berkeley was so surprising. Most commencement speakers rally the graduating class to go out and do great things, to succeed. Anne has never spoken from the perspective of

calculation and intentionality and success. She speaks from a reality of struggle and failure and grace.

She acknowledged in her address this incongruity of her presence: "I bet I'm beginning to make your parents really nervous—here I am sort of bragging about being a dropout, and unemployable, and secretly making a pitch for you to follow your creative dreams, when what they want is for you to do well in your field, make them look good, and maybe also make a tiny fortune.

"But that is not your problem. Your problem is how you are going to spend this one odd and precious life you have been issued. Whether you're going to spend it trying to look good and creating the illusion that you have power over people and circumstances, or whether you are going to taste it, enjoy it and find out the truth about who you are" (from Salon.com, "Let us commence" by Anne Lamott).

Whether you and I are beginning an educational endeavor or are completing it, whether we are 15 or 45 or 65 or 85, we may still wonder what we will be when we grow up. I think our quest has very little to do with what we will be. Our concern is focused more on "doing." What will I do that is significant? What difference will my life have made when it is over? How have I contributed something worthwhile? What is my life's impact?

In the movie "Saving Private Ryan," the opening and closing scenes have an aged James Francis Ryan at the gravesite of Captain John Miller who extracted him from combat in World War II at the cost of Miller's life. This aged Ryan wants to know if his life was worth the sacrifice of Miller's life. At Miller's gravesite in Normandy, Ryan collapses to the ground and begs his wife, "Tell me I've led a good life. Tell me I'm a good man."

It is the same assurance we all seek. We want to know that we have been good for something rather than good for nothing.

How do you assess whether you have been good for something or good for nothing? It is not always clear.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said it is counter-intuitive. "Ten thousand fools proclaim themselves into obscurity while one wise man forgets himself into immortality."

Our culture has its signposts that supposedly indicate when a person is "significant": the respect of colleagues, success which leads to financial independence, at least a modest amount of fame in society. Being talented at something that places you in the public eye is the surest way to be culturally affirmed as significant. But if nothing else, you can just look really good, you can surround yourself with all the accoutrements of a person who looks successful: you can dress like them, smell like them, dine like them.

Jesus, in his teachings and by his life, challenges such notions. It is not that respect or success or financial independence or fame or even looking really good are bad things in themselves. However, if you make gods of them and believe they will deliver you from insignificance, you will be disappointed. And in some way, by focusing on such concerns, we will be distracted from those things that can grant true meaning and fulfill the deepest longings of the human heart.

Jesus said, "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and the justice and righteousness which belong to that realm, and all these other things will be yours as well."

How do we move from a preoccupation with things and with self-promotion and on to a focus on God?

First it is important to recognize that God has competition.

In the scripture prior to our reading this morning, Jesus says, "No one can serve two masters, for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."

It may seem to us that the possession of wealth grants significance or meaning to our lives. God has competition.

Do you know that food and drink and clothing are leading indicators of wealth, and that the desire to appear wealthy is played out by consuming the same things as those who are wealthy?

I would like you to play a bit of word association to see what comes to mind:

- Arby's; Dean and Deluca's
- Water; Dom Perignon
- Walmart; Neiman Marcus

Of course food and drink and clothing are basic to human survival. Yet you and I are aware that what we eat and drink, and where we dine, and the kinds of clothing with which we are attired, and the places we buy it—these have little to do with our basic necessities.

Food and drink and clothing, in Jesus' culture as well as in our culture, demarcate economic and social and ethnic and religious fault lines that separate and segregate. Separation and segregation are not values that God's realm and God's people are encouraged to embrace.

Jesus' teaching about the birds of the air and the lilies of the field not only call disciples to trust in God for their basic needs. It is also a call to trust in the significance which God grants to our human lives. All our finest eating and drinking and dressing may prove nothing more than how self-centered we can be.

God competes with our culture regarding who assigns value to the manner in which we live our lives. God's values are not only different, but they are at odds with much of our cultural values.

We have the opportunity to move from a preoccupation with things to a focus on the values of God's kingdom. Jesus suggests that we can do that by paying attention to the small details.

Jesus advises: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow."

Here is another rendering of that passage. "See all the wildflowers that spring up in the early rains? They blossom and fade in a day, and then they are gathered and dried and used as fuel for cooking. King Solomon, with his over-the-top riches, was never bedecked as royally as these transient and useless weeds. If God attends

these weeds with such magnificent detail in color and shape, how much more will God care for you?"

The American painter Georgia O'Keefe was known for her sensuous paintings of flowers. She explained her success by saying, "In a way, nobody sees a flower, really, it is so small, we haven't time—and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time." Georgia O'Keefe took time, reflecting what she observed through the lens of her life and the artistry of her hand, and became one of the leading painters of the twentieth century.

Barbara Brown Taylor calls this the practice of paying attention. Another term she uses is reverence. By reverence she means the recognition of something greater than the self, something beyond human creation or control. This includes things like God, of course, but it also includes birth and death, nature and truth, to name a few. Taylor writes, "Most of us move so quickly that our surroundings become no more than the blurred scenery we fly past on our way to somewhere else" (*An Altar in the World*, p. 24).

What we do pay attention to is: the wrist watch, the cell phone, our to-do list, the speedometer. All of these things feed our illusion that life is manageable by us if only we could move a little faster.

Do you know it is not possible to consider the lilies when you are speeding down the highway at 70 miles per hour?

Anne Lamott, in her commencement address, provided this advice: "Slow down if you can. Better yet, lie down. In my twenties, I devised a school of relaxation that has unfortunately fallen out of favor in the ensuing years—it was called Prone Yoga. You just lie around as much as possible."

According to Anne, the most spiritual and subversive acts by human beings against this unrelenting culture are to rest and to laugh. You see, it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to consider the birds or the lilies at all unless you are sitting, perhaps in the grass, perhaps prone on your back or on your belly.

There must be some truth to her words because when I hear them, I feel a twinge of disbelief and a hope that she is right.

In this interim time at First Presbyterian Church, I would encourage you as a congregation to resist the cultural pressures that keep us tired and anxious and humorless. What would it mean to be a congregation that was not frenetic but centered in what God values? What would the mission of such a congregation look like?

Mary Oliver, in her poem "The Summer Day," reflects on her experience of the world, and of God, and how we best fit into it all.

> Who made the world?
> Who made the swan, and the black bear?
> Who made the grasshopper?
> This grasshopper, I mean—the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
> the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
> who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
> who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
> Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
> Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
> I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
> I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
> into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass
> how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
> which is what I have been doing all day.
> Tell me, what else should I have done?
> Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
> Tell me, what is it you plan to do
> with your one wild and precious life?
>
> *Mary Oliver, The House Light Beacon Press, Boston, 1990.*