

## LOVE WHAT YOU LOVE

“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.’

“At that time Jesus said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.’

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

**Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**

### **Wild Geese - Mary Oliver**

You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves.  
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.  
Meanwhile the world goes on.  
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain  
are moving across the landscapes,  
over the prairies and the deep trees,  
the mountains and the rivers.  
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,  
are heading home again.  
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting--  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.

Adam and I are reaching the point in our lives where a number of our friends are beginning to purchase homes, have children, settle into fully time jobs, and begin what we jokingly refer to as “adult life.” And while we are happy for them, and have consciously made our own choice to continue the student life while I pursue a PhD, there is, for me at least, a little

bit of jealousy. As my 28<sup>th</sup> birthday quickly approaches, I am beginning to realize that I had certain expectations for my life. For example, I thought that by my 28<sup>th</sup> birthday I would own a house, perhaps have a child, certainly have a full-time income. And yet, we are living in an apartment we can barely afford, working to scabble together part time jobs, and nowhere near ready for children, though we love our dog. And while I think we are in the right place doing the right thing, there is still the lingering fear that I am irrevocably behind in life.

And it's not just "secular" standards that I feel measuring my life. As a seminary graduate, I am pretty sure there is a certain amount of "religiousness" I should be living. For example, I should know my Bible well enough that I could pull scripture quotes from memory when the situation warrants. I should at least have a rich prayer life that I am committed to and fed from, and I should probably feel decently close to the God I profess to believe in. Yet, as with our "secular" life, I find myself some place different: struggling to make time for prayer, wondering where God might be in the midst of our new life, and wondering if that feeling of closeness I remember from other periods will ever return. And, like the rest of my life, I think I am in an "okay" place spiritually – it's just not where I'm afraid I'm supposed to be.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus says "come to me, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light." And Mary Oliver writes, "you do not have to be good. You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting. You only have to ... love what [you] love."

On the one hand, there are these exacting standards we hold ourselves to, both in society and in the Church; and even Jesus says in our passage that wisdom will be vindicated by her deeds, by what we do. And then, on the other hand, there is this sense that following Christ lightens our burdens and life is most fully lived when we let go and allow ourselves to love what we love.

I can't speak for you, but I think it is challenging in our society not to be an overachiever – or at least feel the pressure to be an overachiever. Perhaps it gets easier as you get older, but I suspect there are certain standards by which we measure ourselves at every stage of life – are we earning enough money? Are we living in the right place? Are we high enough on the job ladder? Are our children turning out to be the young adults we hoped they would be? Whether we're in school striving for the top grade, in a job striving for the promotion, or in society striving for social acceptance, it is hard to escape the pressure to align our lives a certain way, to strive for very specific goals. Even in the church we set up hierarchies and offices, standards of faithfulness and purity that we urge people to achieve or at least aim for. If there is any doubt, one needs only visit a local bookstore to see the large selection of self-help books published to help us reach these preset standards of living.

And yet, there is rarely the sense that we have arrived. For once we have achieved one sense of goals, there is always another awaiting for us – and it is a strong person who is not tempted by these expectations.

Being faithful doesn't exempt us from standards, but I think if we take today's text seriously, it challenges the social standards we're inundated with in our daily lives. And, I think

Mary Oliver and Jesus are making the same point: “you don’t have to be good. You don’t have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.” You need to let yourself love what you love. For the yoke is easy and the burden is light. I think our mistake is when we allow other people to dictate what is good for us – what is right.

Following Jesus is harder and easier than we make it out to be – it isn’t about adhering to a strict set of rules, it is about the tricky work of figuring out for ourselves who God is and what God is calling us to – this is work we have to do individually as we discern our own call and path in this world; and it is also work we need to do communally as we discern together who God is, where God is in our world today, and what God is calling us, as a community to do.

About two weeks before I graduated from high school, the senior high bible study I was involved in at my church had their final meeting. We were a small group, about 15 on a big night; and, like normal, we had dinner together before gathering on couches to look at the passage for the evening. Like this community, we chose our texts both from Scripture and from poetry, music lyrics, novels, whatever struck our fancy during the week. For our final meeting, however, our youth pastor had compiled all of the texts we had used during the year and made a booklet for us to keep; we spent some time remembering our conversations and thinking again about the texts we had talked about and then our pastor asked all the seniors to share a piece of advice with the group. I couldn’t for the life of me tell you what I said, but I have always remembered what our youth pastor shared at the end. She said, “as you go out into the world, always remember to follow your bliss.”

There have been crossroads in my life when I have found myself unsure which way to turn, which choice to pick, which direction to go in. Inevitably I make lists and think through what I “should” do or what I “ought” to choose, but when it comes time to make the final decision, my pastor’s advice always sticks with me “follow your bliss.”

It’s tempting to think that religion and faith are about following certain paths and adhering to specific rules, but I think Mary Oliver and my youth pastor got it right, for Christ’s burden is light and his yoke is easy. The call of faith isn’t to follow someone else’s list of rules, but to look for yourself where God is acting in the world and find ways to participate in God’s work by loving what God has given you to love and following your bliss. God’s desire for us is happiness and joy – our job is to find it and live into it, trusting that as we do God is working through us to bring joy and justice into the world. Amen.