

“Building Bridges Across Time”

A sermon by the Rev. Cynthia L. Black, D.D.

Church of the Redeemer, Morristown, New Jersey

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Song of Solomon 2:10-13; 8:6-7; “A Psalm of Life,” By Henry Wadsworth Longfellow; Matthew 5: 1-12

Do you have a favorite poet? Someone who captures your imagination or heart or inspires you to think great thoughts? Someone who sums up the human condition, or leaves it open to interpretation or gets you to think about it in a new way each time you encounter their poetry?

Or maybe there is a style of poetry that leaves you breathless, or thinking, or moved, or inspired. I remember the first time I read Rita Mae Brown’s thin little book of poetry, *The Hand That Cradles the Rock*. Seeing May Sarton read her poetry in person was jaw-droppingly wonderful in college. And what can I say about the poetry of Audre Lourde? I’m not black, but she so captured my young, lesbian heart that I felt like I was being fed and encouraged to help inspire others and change the world.

Audre Lorde died young, at 58, but not before she had helped shape the early days of the feminist movement. Of her childhood, she said, “I used to speak in poetry. I would read poems, and I would memorize them. People would say, well what do you think, Audre. What happened to you yesterday? And I would recite a poem and somewhere in that poem would be a line or a feeling I would be sharing. In other words, I literally communicated through poetry. And when I couldn’t find the poems to express the things I was feeling, that’s what started me writing poetry, and that was when I was twelve or thirteen.”

Earlier this week I was pondering what aspect of the working of the Holy Spirit I wanted to encourage us to think about this morning so I wandered in to the Serendipity Stitchers group to seek their counsel. I didn’t tell them that I specifically was looking for thoughts about the Holy Spirit—it being the season that we here at Redeemer know as the Season *of* Pentecost. I just told them I was looking for sermon ideas.

One member, after a thoughtful silence, said—“why don’t you talk about how words, such as poetry or scripture can inspire us, even long after we’ve heard them.” And that led her to tell me a story about the Favorite Poetry Project and a video she had seen about a person saying what it was that he loved about the Longfellow poem you just heard. I checked out the video, and encourage you to, also, by going to favoritepoem.org. There you can watch a video about Rev. Michael Haynes, who learned this poem in Junior High School, but continued to make connections with it throughout his life, including when he traveled to Barbados with his mother,

so that she could see the land of her childhood. It’s a beautiful story.

It got me to thinking about all of the words that we will hear in this hour. Some will be repeated over and over again throughout our lifetimes—the words of hymns, the words of the liturgy, and the words of scripture. All opportunities for inspiration. Often words that we hold onto, sometimes without even realizing it.

So I had chosen the readings—all words that have inspired me—with the idea of talking about the connections that we make, bridging years of history and different cultures, through words that we hold onto.

And then Thursday night, my first boss’s daughter called to tell me that her mother had died (the wife of the priest that I worked for at my first church) and asked if I would do the funeral.

Last night, as I was writing this sermon, I took a break to go searching online for Judith St. George’s obituary. This was a woman who has written many words in her life time. She was the author of over 40 books—mostly children’s and young adult books. She has gotten many, many awards, including the Caldecott Medal.

Maybe it was because I was writing this sermon. Maybe it was the Holy Spirit. But these words leapt off my computer screen:

“She was married June 5, 1954 to David St. George. Their first home was the historic Longfellow House in Cambridge, MA, the headquarters of George Washington during the first year of the American Revolution. That experience triggered her lifelong passion for American history.”

This same house where Longfellow lived, and was an inspiration for him, became an inspiration for her many years later. Who knows who her words will inspire, as his words may have inspired her.

I want you to think for a minute. I want you to think about scripture passages, or prayers or poems or hymns that have inspired you. Perhaps it’s just a few words that you remember from a time in your life when those words sustained you or challenged you or comforted you. What words have stayed with you, perhaps from childhood? Are there words that you memorized at some point in your life, from, say, a poem, that have special meaning, or are there words of our liturgy, or a hymn, that you hold onto?

I love the words of Longfellow:

*Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.*

*Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each to-morrow
Find us farther than to-day.*

They were written shortly after his first wife died unexpectedly after a miscarriage while they were in Europe. He was heartbroken. Imagine that this grieving man, putting pen to paper and allowing his heart to flow through the ink, would write words that would be held on to and serve as inspiration for people one and two centuries later! Words that would encourage a young man in Roxbury, Massachusetts to go into the ministry, even, and that would continue to inspire him years later while visiting the land of his parents' birth.

Poetry can be powerful, whether it's the poetry of Longfellow or Mary Oliver, Yeats or May Sarton, it connects hearts across time, cultures, geography and a host of differences. At its best, our liturgy does this, too, as does scripture.

The words of our Hebrew scripture and gospel today are both beautiful pieces of poetry. The Song of Solomon is often read at weddings and the beatitudes are one of the most well-known pieces of Christian scripture. Both challenge and bless us with a vision of how the world could be.

Today we give thanks for the Holy Spirit, that moves through creation, and who, as we say at the beginning of the service, is "alive in the land," connecting our hearts and building bridges across time to the source of our inspiration.