

20 Pentecost 2010

[Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7](#), [Psalm 66:1-11](#), [2 Timothy 2:8-15](#), [Luke 17:11-19](#)

Robert Bowler

Mary Olover wrote: *“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.”*

The call of the geese, the little deaths in glory of the autumn leaves proclaiming the flame of their beauty to the sky, the nights growing cold and the days of light filling all space, all call us home, all announce our place in the family of things.

Today’s readings not only speak to us of the grace of God, but of our response, of gratitude, of being caught up in the flow of grace ourselves. *“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.”*

*Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth,
Sing of the glory of God’s name,
Give to God glorious praise...
God is awesome in deeds among mortals.*

Days like yesterday and today make the heart sing. God’s glory is displayed in bronzes, deep reds, yellows, oranges, of such varied hues they make the color palette of Monet seem meager, muddy, mundane. Autumn is a triumphant expression of the exuberance of life, as the year reaches its fullness and dies in glory, only to be reborn as the light returns in the New Year.

This is a time for rejoicing in the bounty of the harvest. It is a time to reap what we have sown. A time to turn back to our hearth fires in thanksgiving for days well spent, work well done, for abundance received with open hearts to life and all it brings.

It is also a time to know we are not alone. We live in an interdependent web of human, plant and animal community. We are not alone. Despite the chaos we see and hear in the news, if we look close to home, to the earth at our feet, and all around to one another, we can know we are home.

Jeremiah knew that his people were going to be in exile in Babylon for a generation or more. He counselled them not to rend their garments and turn from God in despair, but to “build

houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce; take wives and have sons and daughters;... multiply there, and do not decrease.” Even in exile, put down roots—be at home, celebrate life, live in the abundant grace of your God. Even in profound tragedy, when the heart closes in pain and despair, turn to the love and comfort of those close to you, through which flows grace, simple and abundant. Carry on with life even if you only feel a glimmer of gratitude.

In the gospel from Luke for today, Jesus is in a border region between Samaria and Galilee, on his way to Jerusalem. Ten lepers, ostracized from society cry out to him from a distance, “Jesus, master, have mercy on us!” Jesus responded with unconditional love, healed them, and told them to go show themselves to the priests so they may be certified clean and be welcomed back into society. They all turned away to do what Jesus commanded, but one, a foreigner, a Samaritan, turned back to the source of his redemption, praising God with all his heart. He gave himself in thanksgiving to Jesus.

All ten were healed, but only one turned back in thanksgiving to the healer, in praise and thanksgiving. How many of us, with open hearts, cry out in childlike joy at the wonders and grace that surround us day by day? And how many, given a little grace, turn their backs, feeling entitled to spend that grace as they feel they deserve? None of us deserves the grace showered upon us, but grace flows on all as rain pours on everyone. May we learn to respond in gratitude by opening our hearts in praise and thanksgiving by living in that grace and letting it flow indiscriminately through us, in turn, to all around. “We do not have to be good,” but love what we love and give in gratitude what we receive.

There is an old story about a famous pianist and composer and a beautiful thing that happened at the start of one of his concerts. A mother took her little boy to hear the grand pianist so that the boy may be encouraged to apply himself to his piano lessons.

Just prior to the concert, they took their seats. But the mother spotted a friend a few rows back and went to speak with her, telling the boy to stay in his seat. But, of course, the boy could not sit still and, seizing the moment of opportunity to explore, he walked down the aisle and through a curtained doorway.

The house lights dimmed and the mother returned to her seat only to discover that her boy was gone. She looked around frantically, not paying attention to the curtains opening on the stage. But when the audience around her started laughing, she looked up to the stage to find her young son seated at the magnificent Steinway. He was haltingly playing the first song he had learned, “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.”

The mother was horrified and started up to retrieve him, but at that moment the great pianist himself entered from the other side of the stage, putting his finger to his lips to quiet the audience. He moved to the piano, leaned down and whispered in the boy’s ear. The boy did not miss a note, but continued playing. Then the master reached down his left hand and began filling in a bass part to the composition. Then he reached his right hand around the other side

of the child and added a running obbligato. Together, the old master and the young novice transformed an awkward moment into a moment of grace, and as they finished playing, the audience rose to their feet and broke forth in thunderous applause.

Singing the song of gratitude in our hearts is not always easy. We feel insecure, petty, unworthy. We respond haltingly. We, at times, feel more like moaning dirges of lamentation. But in a moment of grace, we hear whispers of encouragement, and God compliments our childlike song with his own symphonics accompaniment, extending and complimenting our best efforts, transforming us in ways we never imagined. Initially, we may feel we sing and play alone, a-capella, but God hears us and out of her abundant heart reaches herself around us like a holy spirit and magnifies our song until it becomes grace itself for others. And then the gratitude and the grace multiplies. This is [baptismal ministry](#), this is the open heart becoming the conduit of heaven's glory, of the life of the world to come, now, in love.

As Paul writes in his letter to Timothy, *“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.”* Amen.