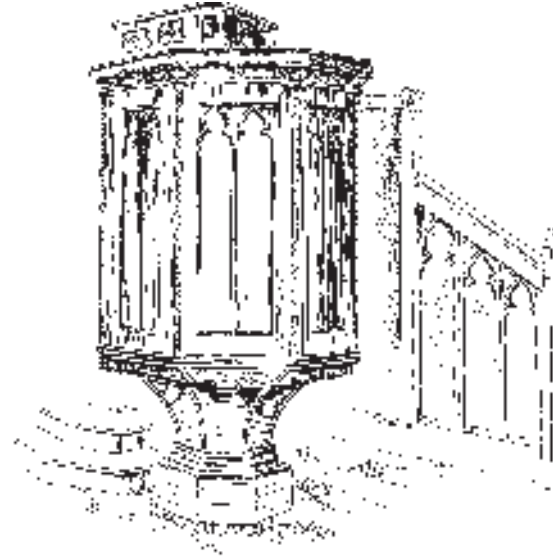


November 8, 2009

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Consider the Lilies

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Matthew 6:25-34

Psalm 46

An old silent pond.
Into the pond a frog jumps.
 Splash!
Silence again.

This is perhaps the best known example of the simple Japanese poetry called Haiku.

An old silent pond.
Into the pond a frog jumps.
 Splash!
Silence again.

The poet, whose name is Basho, makes no comment on what he is describing. He implies no meaning, no message, no metaphor. He simply invites our attention to no more and no less than this: The old pond in its watery stillness, the kerplunk of the frog, the gradual return of the stillness.

In effect Basho, the poet, has put a frame around the moment. What the frame does is enable us to see not just something about the moment, but the moment itself in all its ordinariness and particularity.

Since playing golf, I've had opportunities to walk around a good many ponds and have lost a good many golf balls in them. Most times I walk by the pond without ever noticing the frog's kerplunk, without giving thought to the beauty of the scene. But the poet's frame sets it off from everything else that distracts us. It makes possible a second thought: *consider the frog*, the pond says. This is the nature and purpose of frames. The frame does not change the moment, but it changes our way of perceiving the moment. It makes us *notice* the moment, and that is what Basho wants above all else. It is what literature in general wants above all else, too.

From the simplest lyric to the most complex novel and densest drama, literature is asking us to pay attention. *Consider the frog. Consider the West wind. Consider the boy on the raft, the lady in the tower, the old man on the whaling ship.* In sum, pay attention to the world and all that dwells therein and thereby learn at last to pay attention to yourself and all that dwells inside you.

The sculptor does the same thing, too. Do you remember the Degas exhibit a few years back at the Dayton Art Institute? Degas puts a frame around a 14-year-old ballerina. She is pensive. Her chin is out in a determined and proud pose; her skin is smooth and pale. It is not a remarkable face. You might not look twice at the young girl if you found her downtown standing on the corner of Third and Main. But it is a face *so remarkably seen* that it forces you to see it remarkably too—just as Cezanne makes you see a bowl of apples or Andrew Wyeth a muslin curtain blowing in at an open window. Degas has sculpted a dancer unlike any other dancer in all the world. It's almost as if all the dancers in the world are in this one dancer.

Unlike sculptors who work with space or poets who work with words, musicians work with time—with tone following tone as a second follows a second. *Listen!* says Beethoven or McCartney or Stravinsky or Bono. *Listen to this time that I have framed between the first note and the last and in the sounds in time. Listen to the way the silence is broken into uneven lengths between the sounds and to the silences themselves. Listen to the scrape of bow against gut, the rap of stick against drumhead, the twang of pick against steel string, the rush of breath against lips and metal, the current of air through reed and wood and organ pipe.* "The sounds of the earth are like music," the old song goes and the sounds of music are also like the sounds of the earth, which is of course where music comes from. *Listen to the voices outside the window, the flutter of the wind in the trees, the creak of the chair, the water running in the kitchen sink. Learn to listen to the music of your own lengths of time, your own silences.*

Literature, sculpture, music—the most basic lesson that all art teaches us is to stop, look, and listen to life on this planet, including our own lives, as a vastly richer, deeper, more mysterious business than most of the time it ever occurs to us to suspect as we bumble along from day to day on automatic pilot. In a world that for the most part steers clear of the whole idea of holiness, the fine arts are one of the few places left where we can speak to each other of holy things.

'Stop, look, and listen' is what the Bible is telling us too! *Listen to history* is the cry of the ancient prophets of Israel. *Listen to social injustice*, says Amos; *listen to head-in-the-sand religiosity*, says Jeremiah; *listen to international treacheries and power plays*, says Isaiah; because it is precisely through them that God speaks his word of judgment and command.

And when Jesus comes along saying that the greatest command of all is to love God and to love our neighbor, God, too, is asking us to pay attention. If we are to love God, we must first 'stop, look, and listen' for God in what is happening around us and inside us. If we are to love our neighbors, before doing anything else we must see our neighbors. With our *imagination*, as well as our eyes; that is to

say, like artists, we must see not just their faces, but the life behind and within their faces. *Here* it is love that is the frame we see them in.

My friend, Frederick Buechner, whose words and thoughts are used throughout this sermon, says this, "If I were called upon to state in a few words the essence of everything I was trying to say both as a novelist and as a preacher, it would be something like this, 'Listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace.'"

Buechner is right. God is present throughout the entirety of human experience. There is no sector that is secular. Every part is sacred and may become at any moment, and in unexpected ways, a window through which we see God or a hand with which God reaches out to grasp us. Joseph Conrad writes that, given all that binds humanity together, "There is not a place of splendor or a dark corner of the earth that does not deserve attention, if only a passing glance of wonder and pity."

Not that any of this is obvious or cheap. God is not easily seen, nor is God in obvious form everywhere or anywhere. There is a hiddenness about deity. Not a hiddenness that is revealed only in particular sacred locations or by a particular sacred priesthood. God's presence is in all experience, often in places where we least expect it. What is required in order to perceive the divine is a deepened awareness, a concentrated listening. The Psalmist states it well, "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:30).

In a letter to a friend, Emily Dickinson once wrote that "Consider the lilies of the field" was the only commandment she never broke. She could have done a lot worse.

Let us pray..

O God, we find it easier to talk than to listen, to glance over than to really see, to accomplish than to appreciate. In these busy fall days, help us to "consider the lilies." Help us to be still and know that you are God. Amen.

This sermon has drawn form the following books by Frederick Buechner:

Listening to Your Life

Sacred Journey

Beyond Words

Telling Secrets

The Longing for Home

The Eyes of the Heart