

THE ART OF SAVOURING ©

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Bloor Street United Church

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Readings: Song of Songs 7 and Matthew 6 - see texts at end of sermon

A peasant, says an old story, goes into his little village church every day at noon to kneel in prayer. The priest watches; and finally, one day, he says, "May I ask – is something troubling you?" "No, everything is fine." But, because the priest continues to stand there and look at him, the peasant feels he needs to explain more. He says, "I like to be silent in this holy place. I just look at God, and God looks at me."

"Silence," says Illinois mystic Carolyn Myss, "is the soul's oxygen." (*Entering the Castle*) It helps focus the mind so that all that surrounds us does not escape us, but rather, reshapes us, centres our souls midst whatever chaos swirls – in our life, in our world.

It's hard to be silent in the city, to find a quiet place where we can look at God, and feel God looking at us. But, every morning, if we listen carefully, rising above the city hum, birdsong always greets the dawn.

Poet Wendell Berry says:

Best of any song

is bird song

in the quiet, but first,

you must have the quiet.

Silence – not for a particular purpose, or to seek a desired outcome, but to give ourselves to – that we may be used for God’s purpose. Mystic Esther DeWaal says:

Listen to the silence

let it enfold you,

like a piece of music,

like bird-watching.

The regular Muskoka Haliburton to-the-country exodus is about seeking holy silence that can centre us and reshape us. It is about the innate need of our soul to connect, and re-connect, with Mother Earth, with nature – of which we are a part.

So, as by a magnet, crowds are drawn to Harbourfront, Edwards Gardens, to the Leslie Street Spit, Martin Goodman Trail, to Kew Gardens, Highland Creek, High Park, Toronto Island, Don Valley trails, and to their own backyards. The buzz in garden centres right now is palpable.

Creature before Creator, we go where God’s glory-sun sets over lake and land and rises in mists in unknown worlds beyond. It takes our breath away, silences our busy days, stills our worried minds, and welcomes us into fullness of life. God’s grandeur teaches us ‘the art of savouring.’

I

Savour comes from the Latin *salvador* – which has to do with tasting, smelling, appreciating, finding delight. It’s about awakening the senses – all 5 – no 6, maybe more. And is *salvador* the root of the word ‘salvation’?

Savour this part of the sensual Song of Songs:

Arise, my love, my fair one,

and come away.

For lo, the winter is past,

the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear in the earth,
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.

Savouring is one of God's first gifts to humans. Genesis tells us that God looks around at everything God has made in the garden (God savours it), and says, "It is good, very good." And God gives to humanity all that has been created, every tree that is pleasant to see. Do you think that man and woman, at first, enjoy those pleasant sights, wonder at them, delight in them? And was it when we decided we wanted to possess the fruit of the tree that everything changed? Is that how our garden-world gets all messed up, when we become preoccupied with 'what we want', and lose appreciation and wonder, as well as the willingness and ability to savour?

Jesus says, "Consider the lilies of the field, the birds of the air." Look at, consider, savour. "Do not be anxious. Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness."

II

Jesus knows well the chaos of the world – political pressure, church dysfunction, war, divorce, sorrow, sickness, pain. He knows about AIDS and malaria in Africa, about Palestine/Israel, Ishmael/Jacob, Cain/Abel, about child and Earth abuse, about ways every one of us has eaten forbidden fruit. Jesus knows all this – all of it!

According to Matthew's gospel, he has already provided guidelines for faithful living (what we call the Beatitudes); he's taught his disciples the intimacy and power of his own prayer life, and that which is at the centre of spirituality, forgiveness. He has given us all we need to bring order out of chaos. Having laid all that out for us, "Right now," he says, "Consider the lilies of the field, the birds of the air; do not be anxious about anything."

Yes, he says, chaos is all around us; but despite all this, in the midst of it all, at the centre (the still centre), consider what God provides.

Consider, savour, taste, appreciate, delight – and there you will find salvation. The other day, I was walking home, deep in my own thoughts – actually, this sermon – when an insistent wave and smile of a little boy in a stroller caught my eye and held it, and transformed my day. I think he was savouring me like he savoured his whole day. He'd not lost his Eden gift.

“Savour the lilies of the field,” says Jesus, and children who always teach us. Savour with your heart! Smile at someone you meet on the street, just because you share the same day. Talk to your server in the coffee shop, as if you care – and you might be surprised to find that you really do. Today after worship, get a cup of coffee in McClure Hall, and then say hello to someone you've never met. You may find a lifelong friend. Someone may feel less lonely. It might even be you.

III

This world God creates is amazingly transparent. There are many curtains for us to push back. Find your way to the shore of Lake Ontario. Dare to dangle your toes in the water (it's not that polluted – not yet), feel the sand beneath your feet, enjoy the enjoyment of ducks & swans & gulls & little children, imagine the fish – and all lake life in the waters before you. Consider all the toes that could be touching the 1146 kms of shoreline that very moment, that have ever touched it, the circumstances of their lives, in all the seasons, of the year, of life. And as you savour the possibilities, veils of mystery flutter in the wind/spirit/holy breath.

Almost 100 years ago (1916), Elbert Hubbard described this transparent holiness in *The Sea*. Here is a long excerpt from his book.

“The sea knows all things, for at night when the winds are asleep the stars confide their secrets. In his breast are stored all the elements that make up the round world. Beneath his depths lie buried sunken kingdoms of fable and legend whose monarchs have long been lost in oblivion.”

The sea appropriates and makes his own all that is ... forming, transforming, never ceasing, tireless. Tireless ever - for the sea gets his rest in motion! With acute ear he listens along every coast ... All rivers run to meet him, carrying tidings from afar ...

It is not to be wondered that people have worshiped the sea, for in his depths they have seen mirrored the image of Eternity - of Infinity. Here they have seen the symbol of God's great plan of oneness with all creatures, for the sea is the union of all infinite particles, and it takes the whole to make the one ...

The ocean has heard the dying groans of untold thousands, and drowned their cries for help with his own ceaseless roar; but still his ear has not failed to catch the whisper of confessions that come from souls about to appear before their Maker.

Yet how beautiful and kind is he ... for he keeps only the transient part, gently separates the immortal, and wafts the spirit back to God who gave it. And what does the sea do with all these secrets, mysteries, and treasures? Go shrive thyself, and with soul all in tune to harmonies of the Universe, listen to the waves and they shall tell thee the secrets of life."

IV

Savouring tells you secrets of life – so be intentional, and, practice.

Jewish children, remembering old Ezekiel (3:3), are given honey to taste; it's put on their tongues during the Celebration of the Torah – to remind them that the world of God is "as sweet as honey." Did the taste of honey on Jesus' tongue inspire his love of God's world?

Some Orthodox Jews say a blessing when they smell a pleasant scent – a way of thanking God for creating fragrant trees and plants – in great demand in this springtime flush of hyacinths and apple blossoms.

At the end of Sabbath dinner, a box of spices is passed from person to person – to inhale the joy of Sabbath until it comes again. Mark's gospel (Chapter 14) tells of the sweet woody odour of precious nard that fills the house as Mary anoints Jesus' feet. Despite some fuss about the waste, Jesus savours the moment. "She has done a

beautiful thing. I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached through all the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”

In the very next scene, Jesus (savouring the moment) breaks bread, blesses it, lifts the cup, shares it with his friends, for our sake, and for the sake of God’s world that is as sweet as honey. In the words of Psalm 34 (that live in his heart) Jesus says, “Savour the moment; taste and see that it is good.”

V

Savouring will strengthen you. It will ground you, centre you, steep you, hold you, through all that comes. It is not a when-you-have-time option, but a necessity of life, as essential for your soul as exercise and good nutrition is for your body.

None of us knows what is coming toward us. Life is filled with unknowns.

We wake up living one life and go to bed in an entirely different world.

All it takes is:

- a phone call – one your heart holds dear reaffirms the love you share;
- a toothache – and all your attention is suddenly and totally focused there;
- flowers arrive – and you are blessed by a beautiful thing;
- a heart attack, and you are at death’s door; the driver of a car is distracted by her cell phone, and you crash head-on.
- a beautiful sunset, baby birds chirping, a toddler grinning at you from a stroller
- and you remember whose you are.

Savour each day for the joy that it brings, the wonder, the delight. Savour each hard day for the possibilities, the goodness that can come from it. And, Jesus says, “Do not be anxious.” Leave the morrow for the morrow, for like spirit in the wind, possibilities shift. And, with God, all things are possible.

VI

Savouring takes full involvement, giving yourself to the day, every day.

A man walked into a funeral home and said a prayer for a woman he'd never met – because there were no visitors and he felt someone should at least say a prayer. He signed the guest book. Later, a lawyer contacted him; he had inherited a fortune. The woman's will said that anyone who prayed for her at her funeral would inherit her wealth.

A child dies in a freak accident. Parents and brother are never the same again. But through the storm of unrelenting grief, solace of the soul gradually comes, until spirit meets Spirit in life-savouring ways.

Someone said, "Tomorrow is a mystery; yesterday is history; today is a gift – that's why we call it the present?"

Benedictine monk Brother Stendhal-Rast says that surprise is the starting point to recover the gift of savouring. Expect to be surprised! And you will be. You'll re-discover your wondering heart.

This may be the day when you meet someone who will transform your life, when circumstances come together to strengthen your family, or stir your creativity, or open a door that will lead you out of a blind alley where you've been boxed in for too long. This may be the day when you are surprised by life's generosity – to you – from you.

We never know when the critical mass will be reached, when enough people will take seriously the plight of our planet, when enough people will stop destroying this Eden where God has planted us midst all that is pleasant to see, all we will ever need. Maybe this will be our surprise day!

VII

Savour the birds of the air, the lilies of the field, the Song of Solomon:

Come, my beloved,

into the fields,

early to the vineyards,
to see whether vines bud,
grape blossoms open,
pomegranates bloom.

Come, my city friends,
onto the sidewalks,
into neighbourhood gardens
to greet the day,
where brazen yellow cup & saucer daffodils dance,
and red-lipped tulips sashay,
where glory birdsong serenades us,
and waves lap the feet of our fair city,
where we can look at God,
and God can look at us,
where we may even be able
to savour God savouring all that is,
and us in it.

And – savour the savouring.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen

Poetry of the Ages – from Song of Songs (7) attributed to King Solomon - or is it God's Love for Israel – God's love for humanity – Christ's love for the Church – for you?

SCRIPTURE READING BY JOYCE KELLY and BRUCE McLEOD

B Arise, my love, my fair one,
and come away.

For lo, the winter is past,

the rain is over and gone.

The flowers appear in the earth,

the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land.

J The fig tree puts forth its figs,
and the vines are in blossom;
they give off fragrance.

Set me as a seal upon your heart,
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death.

B Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can floods drown it.

If I were to offer for love
all the wealth of my house,
it would be utterly scorned.

Come, my beloved,
let us go forth into the fields,
and lodge in the villages.

J Let us go out early to the vineyards,
and see whether the vines have budded,
or the grape blossoms have opened.
and the pomegranates are in bloom.

... from Matthew 6

B I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall
drink,
nor about your body, what you shall put on.
Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

J Consider the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet our heavenly Father feeds them. Are we not of more value than they?

B Which of us by being anxious can add one day to our span of life. And why are we anxious about clothing?

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even not Solomon in all his glory was arrayed like one of these.

J But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown in the oven, will God not much more clothe us children of so little faith?

B Therefore let us not be anxious, saying, "What shall we eat? What shall we drink? or What shall we wear?" Faithless people fix on these things. Our heavenly Father knows that we need them all.

J Let us seek first God's kingdom and righteousness, and all these things shall be ours as well