

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

October 12, 2019

Community Prayer Homily

Psalm 111

The other day, I read a beautiful excerpt from *The Clown in the Belfry*, a book by Frederick Buechner, a renowned writer and theologian. I wanted to share it with you this evening.

“When I came out of the Lincoln Tunnel, the city was snarled and seething with traffic as usual; but at the same time there was something about it that was not usual. It was gorgeous traffic, it was beautiful traffic – that’s what was not usual. It was a beauty to see, to hear, to smell, even to be part of. It was so dazzlingly alive it all but took my breath away. It rattled and honked and chattered with life...The city was transfigured. I was transfigured....Buried beneath the surface of all that dirt and noise and crime and poverty and pollution of that terrifying city, I glimpsed the treasure that waits to make it a holy city....”

Holiness...out of the dirt and noise.

I kept reading these words over and over and I thought about all of the times I found myself in awe of the dirt. When I was little it was the dirt of my grandmother’s backyard, the dirt I used to make the perfect mud pie, the dirt I drove my Big Wheel through under her huge sycamore tree, the dirt where I sat and picked up rocks along this little rock wall to watch rolie polies and ant colonies make their homes. In those days, dirt was indeed a kind of holy treasure, a joy of simply beings in God’s creation full of hidden gems that the adults seemed to overlook.

But, I eventually grew up and decided it was better to stay clean than to roll around and dig my toes into the soil of grandmother’s yard. I learned the “proper” way to be, the presentable, socially acceptable persona of the person who had it all together. You wouldn’t find dirt under my nails any more or dust on my clothes. I had people to impress and a job to do. The uninhibited days of my youth, the freedom to be carefree with my wild curly hair and my tomboy clothes and my bare feet gave way to getting things in order.

For a long time, that’s the way I lived – meeting expectations, keeping it together, being certain my outward image was free of dirt and noise. But, to tell you the truth, it was exhausting. It was exhausting to stay so “clean,” to meet all of those standards, to look calm and professional and put together. Because, I knew that inside I felt kind of disheveled, a fraud in this world of curated expectations.

But, truth be told, I liked the messiness, the creativeness, the connection to something elemental even if everyone around me wanted a little more peace and tranquility and acceptability from me. I missed the dirt of my childhood. I missed the possibility, the hope, the magic that came from seeing something holy from what the world had dismissed.

I think that is what Buechner was trying to say...he was pointing out the holiness that comes from those messy places in our lives, from the unacceptable places, the overlooked places. He calls us to take in the noise, the chaos, the smells, the dirt and to seek out the aliveness of it all. Because those are the places that make us beautiful. It is there that God's grace flows and reveals a part of our soul that could never emerge without the acceptance of our dusty selves.

The other day, I was reminded of how much I really do like dirt. I was dressed in black (my usual priestly uniform). Black pants, black shirt, black boots, white collar. I went out to the barn during lunch to check on my horse, River. He's a grey horse (that's an important detail). I brought him in from the pasture and for a time that I lost count of I just stood there with my arms around his neck. He rested his head on my shoulder. I stroked his neck and rubbed his ears. He closed his eyes. It was magic.

When I finally stepped back, you can imagine the scene. My black clothes were now grey. My hands were covered in dirt that came from his body and I'm sure I smelled of barn.

It was wonderful. I didn't wash my hands right away. I kind of liked seeing my dirt stained fingers and my dusty clothes. Someone might have rolled their eyes at how messy I was, especially in my priest's clothes, but I didn't care. It was so much better to appreciate the moment God had given me to be just as I was.

That is holiness. Holiness to accept ourselves just as we are. Holiness to accept that we are loved, no social graces necessary or required. Holiness to trust that even our messiest days are still beautiful in God's eyes. How wonderful to be dusty. Amen.