

Drag Racing on William Cannon December 4, 2011

So I'll admit right up front, the way I came up with the title for this sermon was by posting a statement on Facebook that said, "The sermon you need to hear today is..." and then leaving a blank for people to fill in. I do this occasionally, just to find out what's on people's minds. In case that scares you that that might be the way I always choose my sermons, fear not. It just so happens that this time around, I decided to run with it. You see, the very first response I got to my post was from Michelle Baker, who wrote, "Drag racing on William Cannon." When she sent her response, I quickly wrote back to her, "Sounds like a country song, Michelle," and moved on.

But drag racing on William Cannon moved on right with me, tugging at me as if to say, there's something here; don't laugh it off. So I stopped and thought it over. I knew that Michelle and her family live fairly close to William Cannon, and though I didn't actually ask her, I imagined that she was hearing more than her share of drag racing the night that she wrote her suggestion to me. Maybe she was singing the Serenity Prayer then, too.

Nevertheless, it got me thinking about who might be doing that drag racing, and what they were trying to accomplish in doing so. Was it about competition? Youthful joi-de-vive? The rush of adrenaline? Impressing a love interest? Playing cat and mouse with the police? Maybe it was about looking death in the face, and saying, ha, you can't catch me! No matter what answer I came up with, though, I couldn't help but ask, Isn't drag racing on William Cannon kind of a waste of one's time? Aren't there better things to do, or at least better ways of achieving any of the above mentioned hoped for goals? Having never drag raced on William Cannon or any other street myself--yet--I haven't arrived at experienced-based answers to those questions. It's all theoretical at this point.

But it's not just theory I'm depending on when I admit I'm not innocent of occasionally spending my own time in less than productive or meaningful ways. In Massachusetts this past week, I watched football games I neither cared much about nor found very good. Though I don't own a TV myself, I can and do watch plenty of movies and TV shows on my computer, sometimes watching several episodes

of one program in a sitting. Meanwhile, my stack of unread books grows higher.

On the other hand, I spend a heck of a lot of time thinking about and working for justice, writing sermons, doing yoga, trying to take better care of myself by cutting refined sugar and caffeine (once more, for now) out of my diet, and so on. *And* amidst all that discipline and self care, sometimes all I want to do after a day of work is collapse, eat popcorn, and watch *Glee*.

So which is it? Meaning making, or *Glee* intaking? Yoga or sofa? Kale or candy corn? Bibliophilia or boob tube? Of course, the obvious answer is, it doesn't have to be either/or. With moderation, it can be both/and. Work hard, rest and kick your feet up. Be mindful, while not puritanical. Indulge...a *little!*

That said, a note here before I go on: if you're an addict of any sort, whether you're addicted to certain substances or certain behaviors, or both, my talking about moderation is not an invitation to anyone to try consuming or doing anything moderately that you know you cannot do at all without sliding into disaster. That is not where I

am going with this sermon, and it's not where I want *you* to go, either. Self-perpetuated disaster is not where any of us need to go.

Instead, all of us, addicts or not, would do well to slow down and ask ourselves, how am I filling my days? Is something missing from my life? Is there something I need to let go of, in order to make room for something else, something better? Am I, metaphorically at least, drag racing on William Cannon when I could be traveling the world? Also, what's feeding me? What's feeding my soul? Am I paying attention to what feeds me? Am I paying attention to the world offering itself to my imagination, paying attention to the world calling me, in the words of the poet, "like the wild geese, harsh and exciting--over and over announcing [my] place in the family of things"?

Mary Oliver's poem, "Wild Geese," is a compelling means by which to explore such questions. The poem begins, as you heard Martha read earlier, with a powerful, and in some ways challenging, statement. Oliver writes, "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." On first sight, these lines might seem like reprieve, like

forgiveness, like permission to stop being so hard on oneself and just let pleasure be one's guide. Just "let the soft animal of your body love what it loves," no questions asked. Drag racing it is.

But then Oliver follows that statement with a remark that sounds *nearly* flippant, *almost* dismissive. "Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine./ Meanwhile the world goes on." So wait, are you telling me the world doesn't care about my despair? Are you saying the world's gonna do what it's gonna do no matter if I walk on my knees for a hundred miles repenting or I follow the lead of my soft little animal body and do whatever I want? Doesn't the world care about me, and the choices I make?

For the poet, the answer is a clear and simple yes. For she reveals that the world goes on while we talk about our despair, not because it doesn't care, but because it wants us to *see*. The world wants us to wake up and see "the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain...moving across the landscapes,/ over the prairies and the deep trees,/ the mountains and the rivers." The world wants us to see, to understand that, "whoever [we are], no matter how lonely," that the

world is calling to us, announcing to us our “place in the family of things.”

Which makes me go back to that line, “You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.” If I do that, will I find my place in the family of things? Yes, perhaps. But first I’ve got to ask myself, do I *know*? Do I know what it is my body, what I truly love? Or do I just assume, out of habit, that I know what I love? And what do I *mean* by *love*? First Corinthians says, “Love is patient, love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way... It does not rejoice in wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth.” Buddhist monk and teacher Thich Nhat Hanh states, “True love contains respect. If you are motivated by some desire, that is not love. Desire is not love. Love,” says Thich Nhat Hanh, “is something much more responsible. It has care in it.” Muslim poet Hafiz uses the term “my Beloved,” to address Allah, remarking, “Cloak yourself in a thousand ways; still I shall know you, my Beloved....” And Hafiz states of his beloved God, “You gladden the whole earth and make every heart great.”

And then there is the sweet, right here and now definition of love I received from a friend on the west coast, who happens to be a Unitarian Universalist. “In relationships, all kinds,” she writes, love is “appreciation and acceptance of the other, while encouraging the other to be the person he or she was meant to be, without interference or control, but with support.”

So, whether the poet likes where I’m taking this or not, letting “the soft animal of your body love what it loves,” while not carrying the punitive weight of crawling on one’s “knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting,” does come with its demands. It demands we ask ourselves what it is we love and, before we proceed, it asks us to check in with ourselves if we are really talking about love in the first place, or something else. Because if it is something else--if we’re talking really about the soft animal of our body killing time, or distracting itself from feeling painful feelings with destructive substances or behaviors, or settling for drag racing because traveling the world seems too distant a dream, for example--then we have some reflecting to do. For the world--harsh and exciting--is offering itself to our imagination, if we but take the time to listen and see--and

if we get up off our sand-scraped knees, stop telling ourselves we are only as significant as our despairs, and confront the truth that there is a place for us, a wondrous place for us, in the family of things.

This imperative to own up to the best of ourselves is affirmed by spiritual teacher and writer Marianne Williamson's famous words, often though mistakenly attributed to Nelson Mandela. She writes, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God," Williamson says. "Your playing small does not serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us," Williamson says, "it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we're liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

Whether you are comfortable with Williamson's language that we are "born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us," letting yourself get stuck on that misses the point. Williamson, like the wild geese, like the world itself, is calling our attention to the gifts we are harboring. She is calling us to wake up to the miracle that our lives are. Her words remind me of something I heard a woman, an acquaintance, say years ago. She was sharing about her life, and about her writing, or sometimes her lack of it. Then she said, "I don't want to be remembered as someone who had a lot of potential."

You hear that? "I don't want to be remembered as someone who had a lot of potential." That's why I wanted to talk to the children this morning about their loves, their dreams, their aspirations. I want them, as I'm sure all of you do, to be heard, to be affirmed, so they don't grow up feeling like they have to hide their light, or settle for lesser means of expressing of who they are. I want them to grow up comfortable with confronting the question, which comes at the end of another of Mary Oliver's poems, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

As for us, we adults, some younger, some middler, some older, a good bit of our one wild and precious life has already come and gone. In that time, some of us may have spent more than our share of years trying to be good, walking on our knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting. Some of us perhaps have spent a little too much time letting the soft animal of our body love what it loves without first asking ourselves what we mean by love. Meanwhile, as the poet says, “the world goes on.” Meanwhile, “the world offers itself to your imagination,/ calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting....”

Perhaps, too, the thunder of drag racing on William Cannon can be heard as a call, harsh and exciting. But just as we must ask ourselves what we mean when we talk about love, we also must ask ourselves what the rumble and roar of speeding cars is saying to us. What is it offering to our imagination? If I had laughed off Michelle’s suggestion for a sermon, would I have stopped to examine the phenomenon of drag racing on William Cannon beyond my own irritation with it? Would I have taken enough time to reflect so that I would remember the wise if wistful words of the woman I once knew,

who said, “I don’t want to be remembered as someone who had a lot of potential”? I honestly don’t know.

What I do know is that this sermon called to me, and that I hope it calls to you as well. In this one wild and precious life that we have, in which we get to discover what our passions are, what our gifts are, and what love is, let’s not let it go to waste. Let’s not play small, when we know we are meant to shine. For, as the hymn says, “the light of love here shines upon each face. May it bring faith to guide our journey home.”

Amen.

Hymn #1000 Morning Has Come