March 23, 2014 Norwalk

Third in a Lenten series on ***Take Time to be Holy***

**Pastoral Prayer**

You are a complicated one, O God who we know as Creator and Savior and Sustainer -- as Parent and Child and Holy Spirit; O Trinity who, in the beginning of things, spoke into the emptiness that you had been busy filling with life and said, “Let US make humankind in OUR image. What are we to make of the plurality of your Oneness -- except that at your very core you are relational -- and expect us, if we are to reflect your image within us, to be relational as well?

Mindful that we are whole, but incomplete without others.

Mindful that we are joined in this journey of life by others.

Mindful that we are interconnected.

Interdependent.

Both responsible for and responsible to one another.

That when we neglect or despise another we are condemning a part of ourselves.

And so here in this evocative space we reconnect not only with you, but with each other -- those alongside us here in the pews and those outside these doors to whom we are connected whether or not we know their names.

Especially we pray for those who are celebrating; those who are hurting, who are healing, who are grieving, who are wandering; who are searching. We pray for those standing guard and facing danger on our behalf; those in elected positions deliberating and making choices on our behalf.

Bless them we pray with the sense of your nourishing and uplifting presence; and if they be within our reach, bless them...with us.

For we pray in Jesus’ name, and with the words that he taught us praying: Our Father…

**Matthew 19:13-15**

*Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.*

**Ephesians 4:1-6**

*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism,one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.*

***Taking the time…for community***

One of my favorite songs by Iowa-born singer/songwriter Susan Werner is one titled “*Courting the Muse*.” No, it isn't about justice or world peace or civil rights or any of those other noble aspirations we often talk about. It isn't about faith or religion or spirituality in the usual sense of those words. Though it starts out sounding like a blue love song, it turns out to be about creativity and inspiration and the cold, dark, lonely nights of writer's block and creative paralysis – when the Muse is achingly absent; or if present, is thunderously, suffocatingly silent.

*Well I lit up all the candles*

*And I turned out all the lights*

*And I waited up all hours*

*But she did not come by last night*

*She is beautiful as music*

*But jealous to the bone*

*And she will only love you*

*If you love her alone*

*And she used to sleep beside me*

*In my narrow single bed*

*When I took public transportation*

*And I was badly underfed*

*And she loved me more than a lover*

*More than anyone I've known*

*Yes she will truly love you*

*If you love her alone,*

*But then came some fame and fortune*

*And I got to feelin' pleased*

*And I paid her less attention*

*As my situation eased*

*So she left me for a busker*

*On the Spanish steps in Rome*

*And I could see that she loved him*

*'Cos he loved her alone*

*Now every night I light the candles*

*And I pray that she'll return*

*For I have learned the double lesson*

*That all her suitors learn*

*Don't get too much lovin'*

*Don't care what you own*

*'Cos she will only love you*

*If you love her alone*

Creativity, the song suggests – being mentored by the Muse – comes from the kind of “dirt-under-the-fingernails” connectedness to the grit and gristle of real life that gets severed by too much comfort and ease and self-containment. When we begin to do well enough to be self-sufficient, the song gently hints, something deep within our soul begins to atrophy and recede into silence.

I think of that insight when I come across the odd little addendum to the biblical farm bill contained in the 19th chapter of Leviticus – that portion of the law devoted to pragmatizing what it means to be holy:

*When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God.* ***[1]***

What surprises me about this law is its sensitivity to the deep and vital interconnectedness necessary among people and their environment if we are to thrive; the expansive worldview put forward as the only effective means of “courting the muse” of creative and sustainable living:

* don't take it all;
* don't pad your own cushion, but pay attention;
* be aware;
* and be moved and shaped by hopes and hurts and hungers and aches beyond your own.
* Don't become too self-contained.
* Stay connected.
* If ***you*** want to live, be attentive to ***their*** living as well.

Don't get so comfortable, in other words, that you lose track of the discomfort of others.

*Don't get too much lovin'*

*Don't care what you own*

*'Cos she will only love you*

*If you love her alone*

And I suppose I'm also surprised by how counter-cultural that view apparently sounded even to those early Israelites. -- else why would it need to be asserted? Exclusionary self-interest, in other words, is not a new phenomenon, nor is the view that anyone who encroaches on it is a parasite depriving me of what is rightfully mine. But, asserts the passage, if God being God is going to carry any weight with us at all, then God's world view will necessarily displace its rivals. Creative, imaginative living will necessarily involve attentive loving.

Which returns us to that other song that has taken our hands to lead us through the weeks of this Lenten season – that old gospel song that urges us to “take time to be holy.” Once again, if weather or travel or extra sleep have prevented you from being present for the first two installments of this series, you can catch up by going to the church's website where you can either read or listen to those sermons or any from the past few months.

If those earlier phrases in the hymn emphasized the intentionality of holiness – of literally taking the time to pay attention, to pray, to study and learn about God's intent for creation, the phrase that frames us this morning focuses on the relational dimension of holiness:

*Make friends of God’s children, help those who are weak...*

It sounds simple enough. But even at a literal level it turns out that we need to take some time to actually choose to do it. Take, for example, that story that Matthew tells about children mucking up the orderliness of Jesus' public appearances. The disciples, according to the account, “*spoke sternly to those who brought them; but Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.” And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.*

If it's easy to get indignant at the disciples for their heartlessness, let me also guess that there have been other times, such as flying in a plane or strolling through the mall or riding in the elevator, or checking out at the grocery store, when the petulant tantrum or reckless exuberance or incessant wailing of kids helps account for the invention of Paregoric.

But I suspect that more was going on in Jesus' exemplary welcome than just the affirmation of kids. Recall that in Jesus' culture, children had *potential* value – as adults in waiting – but little inherent worth. They had no voice, they had no rights; they were property, with a functional value along with the cow or the sheep or the chicken. Quite literally one of the “least of these” that Jesus would later call attention to, children were not among those who garnered much concern or attention.

Except, as this story bears witness, from Jesus. And that is the point. “Make friends,” Jesus was demonstrating, “with God's children” -- not merely the young, but precisely all those who are typically and routinely marginalized or ignored or forgotten. “***Have time*** for them,” urges the song. “***Listen*** to them. “ Listen to understand, because understanding their hopes and hurts and aspirations and frustrations is just as important as understanding the titans of industry or the powerful in elected office.

***Our*** living is intertwined with the living of ***others***, and we will only thrive if we take the time to attend to them. Or as the writer to the Ephesians put it:

*lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace...speaking the truth to our neighbors as members of one another...being kind to one another, forgiving; imitating God, as beloved children, who live in love, as Christ loved us.*

For as it turns out, there is no *personal* muse – private and exclusive and concerned for our singular and particular success – but only one whose inspiration is heard in the plucking and strumming of the cords that bind us together; heard as we listen carefully, humbly, empathically...

...to understand.

[1] Vss. 9-10