

Sabbatical **Rev. Kelley L. Becker**

Poem: The Summer Day by Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Can you picture Mary Oliver strolling through a field of wildflowers, looking off into the distance, taking it all in? Can you see her noticing the trees blowing in the wind, hearing the leaves as they rub against each other on the branches? As she walks, her gaze shifts to a point about ten feet away, a bright pink flower in a sea of white, orange, and yellow. She wonders how that happened...how is it that there is only one pink flower in the whole field? She kneels next to that lonely pink bloom, and it is then she notices the grasshopper. She's surprised it doesn't hop away as she gets closer, it stays, seeming to be putting on a show just for her.

There is so much to see in that field. Even if she spent all day wandering among the flowers and grass, she wouldn't begin to see it all. There isn't enough time.

And besides, what is there in that moment will be changed the next. As she moves through the field, it is changing under her feet and all around her.

Some might say she is wasting her time dwelling there, wondering about flowers and grasshoppers. It's curious really, that the world doesn't seem to value that kind of wondering. After all, there are other things to wonder about...artificial intelligence, the stock market, what's for dinner. I wonder if, in the end, we will regret not spending our "one wild and precious life" focusing on grasshoppers and flowers, birds and creepy crawlies, the things that, with no intervention from us, grow and change, bloom and lay dormant, and bloom again. I imagine on my last day, I will not wish I had spent more time reading the news or worrying about things I cannot control. I will be happy for the moments I spent in awe of this place where we live and the ones we get to share it with. I will be grateful for what I learned about myself and the Holy in those moments.

In this season of grieving my dad's death and preparing for sabbatical, I've thought a lot about the preciousness of life, how there never seems to be enough time. I've considered what I want to do or learn or become or create before this wild ride ends for me. This time of sabbatical you have given me is a gift. In a surprise to nobody, I have given myself a to-do list, though it is very different from usual ones. I plan to use this time to rest, reflect, and refocus, so that I can try to make certain whatever I do, learn, become, or create in this next season honor the preciousness of this life. I don't know where this journey will take me, but I do know where I am starting.

Researchers are calling this time in the life of the Church, "the great pastor resignation." As of March 2022, 42% of pastors had considered quitting in the previous 12 months. In a study by the Barna Group, the leading research organization focused on the intersection of faith and culture, full time pastors reported that stress, isolation, and political division are some of the issues factoring into their desire to quit.¹ I don't know how this compares to other professions, but that seems like a lot of people considering quitting. Almost half of all pastors are considering not just leaving the church they are serving, but leaving ministry altogether.

¹ <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-quitting-ministry/>, accessed, 6/1/23.

That is not the place I am in here at the start of my sabbatical. I'm one of the lucky ones. I haven't considered quitting ministry. Obviously, it's because I have no other marketable skills. That's not true. I am a very good dogwalker. During COVID when I was preaching to a camera every week, unable to spend time with all of you, and feeling ill-prepared for my work as a televangelist, I did not love my job so much. But I knew it wasn't forever and, more than anything, I just wanted everyone to stay healthy.

What I know is that many pastors begin their sabbaticals burned out and, while the purpose of a sabbatical is not this, many of my colleagues have used their sabbatical time to look for another job. As I said, I am one of the lucky ones, I am not burned out. I am still as passionate about our shared ministry as I was the day I walked in the door, probably more so. I won't be spending sabbatical time reflecting on whether I feel called to continue to be your minister. I continue to feel a strong sense of call to this church and to this community, though the community drives me to eat brownies sometimes. So, for all of you who have wondered, and even asked, if I am coming back, the answer is yes. I am coming back. And I am already looking forward to it!

One of the things I love about the poem by Mary Oliver I read is that it illustrates what I know is true, I just forget sometimes. When we slow down enough to be filled with wonder and awe, we get some clarity around who we really are, and we start asking and feeling the deeper questions of life. I think Jesus made people uncomfortable sometimes because he wasn't afraid of the big questions and didn't mind trying to help his followers answer them. My sense is that Jesus wasn't a guy who engaged in much small talk. He was the guy who, when somebody told them they were "fine," he would say, "No, how are you really?"

One day Jesus led a large group of his followers up a grassy hillside and used nature, which I've heard people call "the first scripture." He took them there to illustrate his point regarding some of the deeper questions of life. The author of Matthew imagined that he said this:

***Scripture Slide**

²⁵ "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds

them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? ²⁸ And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

We tend to make the Bible harder than it ought to be. This passage asks us to draw on and trust what we have seen with our own eyes. We have seen birds swooping up out of the grass into the air – not worried about their next meal, simply following the current of wind over the hillside. We have seen the colors of flowers scattered in a field. Surely, if God cares about this, God cares about all of us. Jesus had a gift for using ordinary life to talk about the extraordinary love God has for all of us. The birds and flowers in our backyards call to us and remind us that we were not created to spend our lives riddled with anxiety, running from one thing to the next, never resting, always producing.

This summer, I will rest, and I try not to worry about whether I am resting correctly. My rest will look like long bike rides, yoga, and trips to the dog park so Shadow can play with his friend, Kirby. My rest will be books and iced coffee on the patio. My rest will be playing with grandkids and eating ice cream. And I hope as I rest, the inner, very critical voice that often keeps me from resting, will also take a rest so that perhaps I can appreciate “what is” for what it is and not what I think it “should” be.

As I reflect on “what is,” I plan to notice what and who receives my time and energy, knowing I really do have this one “wild and precious life.” I need to figure out how to balance my work and my life. If you read my May Examiner-Enterprise column, you know I have never taken a whole week off when our grandkids have visited us. I’ve always tried to keep working, often staying up late to work while they sleep. As I said in my column, I am not proud of that. And to be clear, you

didn't ask me to do that, nor did you expect it. It's a me thing. It's a me thing I need to change.

Times they are a changin'. And all of us must change too. The sabbatical will allow me time to refocus on creating the life I was born to live and becoming the leader you need me to be for the next season. In the last 6 ½ years, together we have changed. Look around, this isn't the same community it was when I was called here. When I came, I was told I would either help turn this ship around or help turn out the lights. John will tell you, I'm not good at turning out lights. Those first couple of years were a bit anxiety ridden and they felt like constant change, and you hung in there and held true to your promise that you would do what it took to be the church we were created to be. I wonder now if we have celebrated enough along the way. I wonder if I have told you often enough how proud I am to be your minister. Every single day you make me proud.

So, while we will not be physically together this summer, I hope we can, together, refocus on dreaming dreams of what's next and how we will get there. Yes, it will require more change, but I think we have it in us. The winds of change are blowing...sometimes they blow in the smells of BBQs and honeysuckle, sometimes they blow in dust and chaos. Winds are unpredictable like that. I know whatever comes next, we will weather it with compassion and love and then we will sit at the table together, always pulling up enough chairs for everyone, and the more crowded that table gets, the more we will celebrate.

I will miss you! You are loved, dear ones, more than you know. Amen.

If you have been thinking about officially joining the church, you should do that today, although Anna will be happy to receive new memberships all summer long. But if today is the day for you, I invite you to come forward following this song.