

The Third Sunday of Advent  
December 17, 2017  
1 Thess. 5:16-24

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### **Story Telling and Story Dwelling The Consolation of Water Lilies (Gratitude)**

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

In First Thessalonians, the earliest of the writings in our New Testament, Paul addresses the congregation he helped to start. In today's passage, we hear Paul's final exhortations to the people of that congregation:

pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you...hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

Paul encourages those ancient Christians and us to live lives of continual joy, prayer, and thanksgiving as we prepare for the coming of Christ. These are the qualities of spirit that I want to highlight on this Third Sunday of Advent as we get ready to welcome Christ in a manger. Joy, prayer, and thanksgiving blend nicely into the theme I want to emphasize today, that of gratitude.

You may recall from a couple of Sundays ago that I consider this part of the work of restoration or "re-story-ation." We humans have always been story tellers. We are also "story dwellers." In hopes that we live into better stories, I again borrow a story from the book "Braiding Sweetgrass" by Robin Wall Kimmerer (pp. 98ff.).

"Before I knew it," Kimmerer writes, "and long before the pond was ready for swimming, (my daughters) were gone. My daughter Linden chose to leave the little pond and put her feet in the ocean at a redwood college far from home. I went to visit her that first semester..."

"I had known it would happen from the first time I held her—from that moment on, all her growing would be away from me. It is the fundamental unfairness of parenthood that if we do our jobs well, the deepest bond we are given will walk out the door with a wave over the shoulder. We get good training along the way. We learn to say 'Have a great time, sweetie' while we are longing to pull them back to safety. And against all evolutionary imperatives of protecting our gene pool, we give them car keys. And freedom. It's our job. And I wanted to be a good mother.

"I was happy for her, of course, poised at the beginning of a new adventure, but I was sad for myself, enduring the agony of missing her. My friends who had already weathered this passage counseled me to remember the parts of having a house full of children that I wouldn't miss a bit. I would be glad to retire from the worried nights when the

roads are snowy, waiting for the sound of tires in the driveway exactly one minute before curfew. The half-done chores and the mysteriously emptying refrigerator...

"I remember my babies at the breast, the *first* feeding, the long deep suck that drew up from my innermost well, which was filled and filled again, by the look that passed between us, the reciprocity of mother and child. I suppose I should welcome the freedom from all that feeding and worrying, but I'll miss it. Maybe not the laundry, but the immediacy of those looks, the presence of our reciprocal love is hard to say good-bye to...

"Before my younger daughter, Larkin, left, she and I had a last campfire up at the pond and watched the stars come out. 'Thank you,' she whispered, 'for all of this.' The next morning she had the car all packed with dorm furnishings and school supplies. The quilt that I made for her before she was born showed through one of the big plastic tubs of essentials. When everything she needed was stuffed in back, then she helped me load mine in the roof.

"After we'd unloaded and decorated the dorm room and went out to lunch as if nothing was happening, I knew it was time for my exit. My work was done and hers was beginning.

"I saw girls dismiss their parents with a waggle of fingers, but Larkin walked me out to the dorm parking lot where the herds of minivans were still disgorging their cargos. Under the gaze of deliberately cheerful dads and strained-looking moms, we hugged again and shed some smiley tears that we both thought had already been used up. As I opened the car door, she started to walk away and called out loudly, 'Mom, if you break down in uncontrollable sobs on the highway, please pull over!' The entire parking lot erupted in laughter and then we were all released.

"I did not need Kleenex or the breakdown lane. After all, I wasn't going home. I could manage leaving her at college, but I did not want to go home to an empty house...

"I had planned for this with my special grief-containment system strapped on top of my car. Spending every weekend at track meets or hosting slumber parties, I rarely found time to go paddling alone. Now I was going to celebrate my freedom rather than mourn my loss. You hear about those shiny, red midlife crisis Corvettes? Well, mine was strapped on top of the car. I drove down the road to Labrador Pond and slipped my new red kayak into the water.

"Just remembering the sound of the first bow wave brings back the whole of the day. Late summer afternoon, golden sun and lapis sky between the hills that fold around the pond. Red-winged blackbirds cackling in the cattails. Not a breath of wind disturbed the glassy pond.

"Open water sparkled ahead, but first I had to traverse the marshy edges, beds of pickerelweed and water lilies so thick they covered the water. The long petioles of the

spatterdock lilies, stretching six feet from the mucky bottom to the surface, tangled around my paddle as if they wanted to keep me from moving forward. Pulling away the weeds that stuck to my hull, I could see inside their broken stalks. They were packed with spongy white cells filled with air, like a pith of Styrofoam, that botanists call *aerenchyma*. These air cells are unique to floating water plants and give the leaves buoyancy, like a built-in life jacket. This characteristic makes them very hard to paddle through but they serve a larger purpose.

“Pond lily leaves get their light and air at the surface, but are attached at the bottom of the lake to a living rhizome as thick as your wrist and as long as your arm. The rhizome inhabits the anaerobic depths of the pond, but without oxygen it will perish. So the *aerenchyma* forms a convoluted chain of air-filled cells, a conduit between the surface and the depths so that oxygen can slowly diffuse to the buried rhizome. If I pushed the leaves aside I could see them resting below...

“Once the showy brandybottle flowers have accomplished their goal of attracting pollinators, they bend below the surface for several weeks, suddenly reclusive while their ovaries swell. When the seeds are mature, the stalks straighten again and lift up above the water the fruit—a curiously flask-shaped pod with a brightly colored lid that looks like its namesake, a miniature brandy cask about the size of a shot glass. I’ve never witnessed it myself, but I’m told that the seeds pop dramatically from the pod onto the surface, earning one of their other names, spatterdock. All around me there were lilies in all stages of rising and sinking and reemerging, a waterscape of change that is hard to move through, but I bent to the task, pushing my red boat through the green...

“Scientists used to think that the movement of oxygen from the surface leaves of lilies to the rhizome was merely the slow process of diffusion, an inefficient drift of molecules from a region of high concentration in the air to low concentration under water. But new inquiries revealed a flow we could have known by intuition if we had remembered the teachings of plants.

“The new leaves take up oxygen into the tightly packed air spaces of their young, developing tissues, whose density creates a pressure gradient. The older leaves, with looser air spaces created by the tatters and tears that open the leaf, create a low-pressure region where oxygen can be released into the atmosphere. This gradient exerts a pull on the air taken in by the young leaf. Since they are connected by air-filled capillary networks, the oxygen moves by mass flow from the young leaves to the old, passing through and oxygenating the rhizome in the process. The young and the old are linked in one long breath, an inhalation that calls for reciprocal exhalation, nourishing the common root from which they both arose. New leaf to old, old to new, mother to daughter—mutuality endures. I am consoled by the lesson of lilies.

“I paddled more easily back to the shore. Loading the kayak onto the car in the fading light, I was doused with the leftover pond water draining onto my head. I smiled at

the illusion of my grief-containment system: there is no such thing. We spill over into the world and the world spills over into us.

“The earth, that first among good mothers, gives us the gift that we cannot provide ourselves. I hadn’t realized that I had come to the lake and said *feed me*, but my empty heart was fed. I had a good mother. She gives what we need without being asked. I wonder if she gets tired, old Mother Earth. Or if she too is fed by the giving. ‘Thanks,’ I whispered, ‘for all of this.’

“It was nearly dark when I got home, but my plan had included leaving the porch light on because a dark house would have been one assault too many...I noticed a pile of presents, all beautifully wrapped in brightly colored tissue paper, as if a piñata had burst over my door. A bottle of wine with a single glass on the doorsill. There was a going-away party on the porch and Larkin had missed it. ‘She’s one lucky girl,’ I thought, ‘showered with love.’

“I looked through the gifts for tags or a card, but there was nothing to show who had made the late delivery. The wrapping was just tissue paper so I hunted for a clue. I smoothed the purple paper tight on one gift to read the label underneath. It was a jar of Vicks VapoRub! A little note fell from the twisted tissue paper: ‘Take comfort.’ I recognized the handwriting immediately as my cousin’s, dear enough to be my sister, who lives hours away. My fairy godmother left eighteen notes and presents, one for every year of mothering Larkin. A compass: ‘To find your new path.’ A packet of smoked salmon: ‘Because they always come home.’ Pens: ‘Celebrate having time to write.’

“We are showered every day with gifts, but they are not meant for us to keep. their life is in their movement, the inhale and exhale of our shared breath. Our work and our joy is to pass along the gift and to trust that what we put out into the universe will always come back.” (This ends the quoted story.)

On Wednesday, I will read you portions of the Native American Thanksgiving Address and we will discuss this story and the nature and importance of gratitude. Kimmerer says of this address: “Every day, with these words, the people give thanks to the land. In the silence that falls at the end of those words I listen, longing for the day when we can hear the land give thanks for the people in return.”

May water lilies, family gatherings, family partings and gratitude become powerful avenues of re-story-ation among us. Thanks, Lord, for all of this, and for the great gift yet to come. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.