

“Speaking of Gnats”

Sermon by Rev. Rebecca Bryan

*When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives
may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great
heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.*

-Wendell Berry

Familiar words to be many of us.

Who among us doesn't feel the need to be free, sometimes? And who isn't overcome with grief, rage, and despair at the state of the world? I haven't been with you in a Sunday worship since the Supreme Court's decision overturning *Rowe v Wade*, though I was with some of you in the streets the day after the decision came down. Who among us doesn't worry about our children, grandchildren, and the plant and animal kingdoms of this beloved Earth?

I know that I do, and that is one of the primary reasons that our annual ministry theme starting in September is peace. We need peace more than ever in the world. We need peace within ourselves, which is an essential part of realizing peace on Earth.

Like the poet, I turn to nature as a source of solace and inspiration when times are tough. I know that many of you join me there.

That's not the only thing I turn to, however. I turn to relationship, community, and the Divine. I also sweep the kitchen floor.

“With all that is going on in the world and all you feel you need to do, why are you sweeping the floor?” asks my husband. “I just am. It helps me,” I answer. Truth be told, sweeping the kitchen floor is one of my spiritual practices. It is the last thing I do every night before turning toward bedtime.

How does dealing with crumbs relieve my feeling of being overwhelmed? How can procuring small

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pieces of vegetables that dropped to the floor while I was preparing dinner make me feel somehow better? Mix in some dog hairs and dirt from our walks, and I'm at peace, at least for a moment.

I've come to understand that the subtleties in life most reliably soothe my soul: the movement of the sheer curtains in the summer breeze, the way lavender smells if I put my face close to its delicate blossom, and the memory that accompanies finding my grown child's stuffed animal from when they were ten.

Ah, yes, I am the wooden flute dreamer and the early morning prayer, the single blossom in a small glass jar, and the light on a clear desk with one book resting in its corner. It is to those things I return again and again, with no offense to those who find equal measure in rock bands, neighbor parties going well into the night, or large crystal vases overflowing with peony blossoms.

What is it that soothes your soul? We can appreciate many diverse things of course but push yourself a little harder for the truth. What returns you to your centered, non-reactive, cool-headed, open-hearted self? We are not designed to live in a perpetual state of overdrive or being overheated. We must find ways to return, center, and restore.

As I've said, it is the subtleties in life that help me to return, perhaps because my personality and drive are inclined to go toward the bigger things. I want answers. I see solutions, patterns, and possibilities. These are all good in right measure. My soul knows my tendency to lean toward the big, thus she calls me back to the small, subtle, simple. Never loud, always present, and always forgiving is this call.

It is not surprising then that some of my largest insights and personal understandings have come from addressing the deceptively small things in life that challenge me. One of the many gifts of being in recovery is that I have people who know me inside and out. One of them is a dear friend I talk with every Friday morning before work. (It is the 8am Friday meeting that I refer to for those of you who have tried to schedule a

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meeting then.) I cherish our conversation and change them only when absolutely necessary.

On many Fridays I have plenty to say. We get on the phone. I start talking and an hour is gone before we know it. My friend listens, offers her insights, and helps me gain clarity on how I may want to respond to some of the biggest things in my life. Her friendship has warded off many an unnecessary disagreement and a holding of a grudge in my life.

One illustrious Friday morning a few years ago, I found I had no “big problems” to talk about. “I don’t know what to say,” I said stumbling over my words. She laughed and replied, “Talk to me about the gnats.”

“The what?”

“The gnats, the little things that you think aren’t really bothering you.”

“You don’t mean like....” I pulled my back from the phone, shaking it in confusion.

“Yes, that. Talk with me about that.”

And so, it began. I realized that those seemingly insignificant things, small annoyances with a colleague or tiny frustrations with my partner, the words spoken by someone to which I was certainly being too sensitive. Those little, subtle things offered me a wide world if I would take the time to explore them.

The annoyance that unaddressed would grow into a grievance or that held an opportunity for new ideas if shared with respect could be useful. As could the tiny frustration I could ultimately laugh at and feel my heart open again to my beloved. Also useful for consideration were the words that hurt, leading to a place of hurt unresolved from my past, a place that love between friends and within myself could heal, even after so many years.

Unlike the things that soothe us, which can be large or small in design, gnats, when unacknowledged, have the potential to eat away at us all like microaggressions or hurtful family patterns. One incident isn’t necessarily so horrible. We turn from the gnawing inside ourselves. We may think it silly or even ridiculous to address it.

But what if it’s not? What if it could be a doorway

into deeper understanding, compassion, or bravery. What if by addressing it we could change things before it becomes ingrained or too large to change.

How is it that by changing the way I use my electric toothbrush, by willing myself to slow down and hold the brush on each tooth for the allotted time, I realize how fast I am prone to be with everything?

And how is it that dealing with one niggling question can clear up years of confusion in a dear relationship?

None of us has the time to address all the gnats. It wouldn’t be helpful if we did. I imagine that would be excruciating. There is a balance, as in all of life.

Physician and author Rachael Naomi Remen suggests a practice to doctors who are burned out. She encourages them to take a few minutes at the end of each day to acknowledge one thing that moved them that day, one thing that intrigued them, and one thing that touched them. Many of course discard the suggestion, finding it a cliché or even silly. The others find themselves restored, awakened, and present to life in ways they hadn’t even realized they had lost.

Exploring our gnats is not the same as gossiping, venting, or bemoaning. It is an exploration of self that asks us to be open minded, curious, and willing to assume responsibility for our part in the situation.

Does the gnat remind us of the scabs in our hearts or represent larger fears or resentments? Is the gnat a stand-in for Uncle Donald or carrier of toxic shame? It helps to have someone to talk to about these things, someone who understands your motive and purpose in speaking of gnats. That can also be a journal or a conversation with parts of your Self.

When the world is overwhelming, and we lose touch with our best self...

When we cannot find the place of rest within ourselves, and our hearts feel nearly sealed closed...

May we take the time to step back, address the little things, and experience the sublime in the subtleties of this day...

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May we turn over the puzzle of the larger world, just for a time, and focus on the pieces of ourselves that need mending...

May we recognize when our sights have lost proportions and may we humbly return to our hearts with grace...

And then, may we sweep the kitchen floor, take a walk to the water, or sing to our favorite rock band.

Amen and blessed be.