**God of the Sparrow**

Fourteenth Saturday after Pentecost

September 14, 2019

Rev. Christine E. Burns

“*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?"* (Matthew 6:26)

Would you please join me for a few moments of quiet. Let us inhale. (pause). Let us exhale. Again. Inhale. Exhale.

Thank you.

If you are anything like me, you forget to breathe properly. It’s not that I am not breathing; it’s that I am shallow-breathing with my body keenly poised for flight, fight or freeze. My reptilian brain is in overdrive. The higher functioning brain isn’t at work because I’m over-functioning, over-worked, over-excited, over-stressed, over-happy. I hope this isn’t something you struggle with as well, but from the various faces and stories I have heard this week and last week, in the hospital, at Starbucks, on Facebook and Instagram direct messages, on the dance floor and at the meetings, many of us are experiencing a lot of what I call #allthefeels.

When I walked into Jenkins Hall on Thursday morning, the toddlers were inside on account of the rain and there was a puddle of toddlers sobbing because everyone wanted to be on the teacher’s lap. Some kids were scooting happily on the scooters, some kids were dancing, and three kids were in a puddle of tears. Maybe it was the rain, probably it’s because they are two. And it’s the start of a brand-new school year and many of them are in *all-day daycare for the very first time.* Our teachers are amazing here at West Parish. They were hugging and rubbing backs and helping the toddlers deal with their emotions. There is a saying that my plant friend, the self-described garden geek, C. L. Fornari, gets sent all the time in meme form that says, “**we are all just plants with more complicated emotions.”**

Jesus knew that about people. He was a human, he experienced #all the feels. When he was overwhelmed he ran away and hid in the mountains and talked to rocks. He begged God for help. He cried and wept. He loved his mom. He probably fought with his parents. He definitely argued with the religious authorities. He got out a whip and overturned tables in the temple. At our house, Reed says, “I have three words for you: **anger management**.” Which provokes more anger because **it’s only two words**! You see, God gets us. God knows we are complicated, emotional, loving, kind, angry, hopeful, scared.

I have a clergy colleague, the Rev. Ann Kansfield, who serves as a chaplain for the Fire Department of New York City. Ann has lived in the city for a long time. She attended Columbia University as an undergraduate and was working in the for-profit world when 9/11 happened. She was downtown close to the towers when they fell. For many reasons, she was called by God to the ministry. As a LGBTQ person, and a member of the Reformed church, that didn’t ordain non-heterosexual people, she didn’t know if that was a path for her, even though her father is a famous pastor and former head of the Reformed Church of America’s theological school. Her dad, the amazing father and pastor that he is, risked it all, to officiate at her wedding to Jennifer Aull and was **rebuked** and **defrocked.** The ripple effect is still reverberating through that denomination. Pastor Ann and Pastor Jennifer co-pastor a church in the Greenpoint area of Brooklyn. The church is now part of the U.C.C. When Ann arrived, the small gathered body of church ladies asked her to keep the front doors closed so nobody would know how small they had become. Ann, with her extrovert self and wide smile, said no. She said, let’s open the doors, put up a rainbow flag and start meeting the needs of our community. There is a lot of hunger in Greenpoint so they started a food program and had seminary students from Union Theological Seminary help run it. It’s amazing how it works now. They use the upstairs parsonage for classroom space and rent it out to directors making movies for extra cash. They invite the neighborhood in and as Brooklyn has gentrified, younger people are coming in. They have a four piece band with a stand-up bass playing in worship instead of an organ. The children’s program is growing and there are lots of LGBTQ folks mingling and happy with the older folks who are historically Dutch Reformed who have lived in the area for generations.

This week, being the anniversary of 9/11 is an especially difficult one for Ann. I roomed with Ann one year at Boston University for a clergy meeting for UCC clergy in their twenties and thirties and we never spoke in our room. She needs to have quiet time to go out and do all the things. When we stepped out to go to the first morning of meetings, there were honking cars as we left the towers at B.U. and I had no idea where to go, so I tagged along with the self-confident New Yorker and she lit up with all the feels. I resonate with Ann as that is how I function as well.

On the anniversary of 9/11, they have a wreath-laying ceremony and Ann leads the prayers for the FDNY Museum. Ann officiates at funerals all the time for firefighters who are still dying from 9/11 related illnesses.

Here is what she posted on Facebook on 9/11.

“Even on the most difficult days, I still feel I have the best job in the world. The anniversary of 9/11 is a really emotional day for me and for the people I serve. You could give me one of those emotion identification wheel tools and I would probably point to the entire circle of them and say I didn’t know which one to pick. Then depending on the moment I might want to crumple up the paper and throw it somewhere.

But honestly, as much as it’s a day of emotions, it was also a day full of love and care - sure I may have attempted to provide some love and care to the people around me, but I received far more love and care than I could possibly ever give.

My favorite moment of the day came from Eve Bucca. Mrs. Bucca’s husband, FDNY Fire Marshal Ron Bucca died while helping to rescue people in 2WTC. He had also been a Green Beret in the Army Special Forces and investigated the 1993 World Trade Center bombing.

Each year on September 11, the fire marshals have a beautiful luncheon to honor their friend and colleague Ron Bucca at the FDNY museum. I’m usually assigned to pray at a wreath laying at the museum that takes place earlier in the morning. I don’t know what took me so long to figure out that I could hang out with the marshals after the wreath laying. But last year I stayed for their lunch, and discovered a whole new crowd of wonderful, interesting, kindhearted people.

I mentioned before that Fire Marshal had been a Green Baret, and his son Ronny Bucca is now also a Green Beret. So as a result, there are lots of Special Ops people in fancy military uniforms at the marshal’s lunch. Last year, the Sargent Major of the Army spoke at the luncheon for Rob Bucca.

My father-in-law, Woody Aull, was a Green Beret. And last year, I must have mentioned something about that to Mrs Bucca when I asked her if the Sargent Major was still around because I had hoped to get a photo with him to send to my father-in-law because he would think it was really cool.

Well, Mrs Bucca must have the world’s most amazing memory because when she saw me on Wednesday she immediately said, “we need to get some photos with you and the guys in the uniforms so you can send them to your father-in-law!” And let me tell you, there is no stopping Eve Bucca. The next thing I know, she had my phone in her hands snapping photos while telling her son to go get the Green Berets.

I couldn’t believe that she remembered. And once I believed it, I also knew that she remembered that I had mentioned how I’m always looking to impress my father-in-law because I’m still a little insecure about being married to his daughter and not his son.

But in that wonderful moment, I could easily uncrumple the feelings chart I had thrown away earlier and pick out feelings like “thankful”, “safe”, or “worthy.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

I love how Ann tells the story of her complicated emotions. We have all been in the middle of the wheel of emotions. At the top of the wheel it reads, “Feelings are much like waves, we can’t stop them from coming, but we can choose which ones to surf.” At the center of the wheel are our primary emotions; happy, strong, scared, calm, sad, mad. As we move out from the center the nuisance of our feelings radiate out from the wheel. In the Bible, the angel of the Lord says “be not afraid” approximately 365 times. Why? Because fight, flight or freeze is a primary response to stimuli. Emotions help us but also hinder us. Our passage for today invites us to deal with worry, with fear, with uncertainty, anger and the unknown with the knowledge that God is there for us. God knows us. God loves us sure as God loves every sparrow, every bird in the air, every insect that crawls, every creature in the sea and the land. God is big enough, and small enough, to be there with us, in all our complicated emotions.

According to the translator of The Message, Eugene Peterson, in his introduction to the Gospel according to Matthew, we learn how “the story of Jesus doesn’t begin with Jesus. God has been at work for a long time. Salvation, which is the main business of Jesus, is an old business. Jesus is the coming together in the final form of themes and energies and movements that have been set in motion before the foundation of the world. …Matthew tells the story in such a way that not only is everything previous to us completed in Jesus; we are completed in Jesus. Every day we wake up in the middle of something that is already going on, that has been going on for a long time; genealogy and geology, history and culture, the cosmos—God. We are neither accidental nor incidental to the story. We get orientation, background, reassurance.” [[2]](#footnote-2)

A member of the Sunday congregation, Arthur Grohe, asked me why I worry so much. Well, I learned how to worry from my mom. Mother Meredith was a professional worrier. She was an amazing educator. She taught ½ day for pay and the other ½ day she taught for free. She didn’t care if there was money in the budget to pay for gifted education, she was an educator and she believed that every child deserved to learn every day and she was going to educate as many kids as she could get into her revolving door classroom. She’d pour herself a pot of Earl Grey tea late at night after doing all the work of taking care of the family and begin the endless grading of papers. She’d stay up every night until every paper was carefully corrected with her meticulous handwriting with her red or black fountain pen. She taught science, math, wrote math textbooks, taught computer programming and literature. She learned from Howard Gardner, the famous professor of education at Harvard, and believed his theory of multiple intelligence where there are many kinds of intelligence. And yet, it was that one parent who was mad at her that kept her up at night. And so she stewed, she perseverated, she worried. I get it from my mama.

Maybe y’all aren’t people pleasers, but I am. And I won’t please everyone here every day. Some days the sermon will work for you. Some days it won’t. Please let me know either way. Yes, I’ll worry. And Arthur Grohe quoted someone else who said, “worrying is like being in a rocking chair, it gives you something to do, but you don’t go anywhere.”

Well, rock away my friends. But know this, God has got you. God is bigger. God is deeper. God is more powerful than the pocket God we create. God can handle the deepest challenges we face. God can look inside our broken selves and see the beauty and God is already putting us back together. I have a more evangelical clergy colleague down the street at Harbor church and he describes himself as a “dumpster fire” and God can work with that. I describe myself sometimes as a “Hot mess” and God can work with that. I tell folks I meet at Starbucks or the local restaurant, if God can work with me, God can work with anybody.

Consider this an invitation, to stop and rest awhile. Take yourself on a long, long walk. Keep walking. Don’t stop until you feel that God is walking beside you or present with you. If you are afraid to walk alone, I’ll walk with you. Or look around, in this faith community we call West Parish of Barnstable, we say “wherever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” So let us journey together for the new church year 2019-2020. I’m excited that it’s not all up to me. I’ll listen to sparrows, and the wind—the Holy Spirit that still blows through our beautiful planet and look to see how God is in your hands, your feet, the smell of marsh at low tide and the angry sea as the storms come in across the Cape Cod Bay.

I will close with a quiet observer, the faithful poet, Mary Oliver whose birthday was this week and I remember with great reverence as she is my muse.

**I Worried**

by Mary Oliver

I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers  
flow in the right direction, will the earth turn  
as it was taught, and if not how shall  
I correct it?

Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven,  
can I do better?

Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows  
can do it and I am, well,  
hopeless.

Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it,  
am I going to get rheumatism,  
lockjaw, dementia?

Finally I saw that worrying had come to nothing.  
And gave it up. And took my old body  
and went out into the morning,  
and sang.

Mary Oliver, Swan: Poems and Prose Poems (Boston: Beacon Press 2010) 39.

1. <https://www.facebook.com/akansfield> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Eugene Peterson, The Message: the Bible in contemporary language (NavPress, 2002), 1329. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)