

" Sacred time, Ordinary time is there any difference?"

Sermon for August 12, 2004.

Words can be as slippery as eels, or a newly caught fish. You think you've got them and off they go. Ever tried to catch a goldfish without a net? We used to have a Siamese fighting fish at home called Sushi and whenever we had to change the water in the bowl we had to catch him first. There he was this tiny bright red warrior soul, trying his best to get away from the giant hands. We meant well but he did not know that. Surely in this election year the chameleon like quality of any word is pounded home by the relentless and often completely meaningless ads. Words become weapons, coded messages for the initiated and smoke screens for politicians and flashy images meant to make us trust or distrust but hardly ever deal with the issues.

Sacred is also a slippery word. Like spirituality or soul we sense it has a meaning and know what we think it is but just try to define it. Common language is no help at all. Sacred cows are untouchable and when we say nothing is sacred any more we mean there are no limits, anything goes. But the word persists. Even Unitarian Universalists who question everything find something that deepen our soul and reach our core be it in nature, in music, in words or in the human touch. Still we have no untouchable place here in our sanctuary, no curtain that a child might imagine a

mystery God or an angel hidden behind. UU's tend toward the practical, most of them. Like in the story of a one of congregations that bought not a Catholic but an old Episcopal church. In the back was the holy of holiest, a niche with a velvet curtain holding the communion goblets, wine and wafers. UU's moved in and found it to be a great place for a large coffee urn. The former owners returned to pick up a few left over things and looked behind the curtain. Oh, they exclaimed, they do worship a coffee pot!

Yet even for us, there are synchronicities, mysteries and wonder. We do hold many things sacred: the inherent worth and dignity of every person, the inherent goodness of our human heart and yes, all of nature's evolving, awesome, complex and mysterious beauty. To worship the Creation or the Creator seems to me to be a question that misses the point, The Universe is ever evolving, birthing new stars, creating and destroying universes and whatever that force is, by what name we call it, God Goddess, Spirit of Life, he, she, it and we are all part of this process. Evolution in this sense is deeply sacred and as its product or unfinished work of art, so are we. On an ultimate level all is sacred in that it holds value and meaning. But we do not live our daily lives aware and open to the ultimate reality every moment. Nor could we and live as mortal creatures that eat and sleep and make love. What makes a moment sacred is our heighten awareness our senses and soul opening up to the eternal. Into our ordinary lives

small miracles creep and strange coincidences occur. And we stop and wonder. When the idea for this service first came to me it seemed to be so clear and so simple. It would be about the role of religion in our daily lives, about how to find a spiritual practice or life philosophy we can use, about finding the truth as well as searching for it. Should be a piece of cake for any liberal minister. But instead here I am with animal stories and an acute awareness that the mythical Native American figure Coyote, one aspect of what we call the sacred, that ancient trickster has been at it again. Yet another lesson in humility, a reminder that whatever it is we call the sacred it will not be caught that easily. Like a cat it wanders where it wants, inscrutable, independent allowing an occasional pat on the head but no more. Oh, so you think you know what the sacred is?

So let me begin with the story of our church cat. We had one in Wilmington, North Carolina. Or maybe it had us. Anyhow it came to our Christmas Eve service. It was a warm night and with all the candles we left the back door open for some fresh air. And just as I began my homily down the center aisle came wandering with its tail in the air. Completely self contained it walked right up to the pulpit sat down and began to groom itself. Then it calmly wandered back and forth and I might as well have been reciting the phone directory. No one was listening and all eyes were on the cat. Back in Puritan times I would have been in trouble, a black cat and

a woman minister? But folks were kind and no one said anything about brooms or spells. And just as suddenly the cat was gone. I forgot all about it until the next spring shortly before Easter when I heard a moaning, meowing sound outside my office window.

There was the black cat again, lying under the bushes. At first we thought it might be pregnant but it was male and clearly wounded. I took it to the animal hospital. The poor cat had a broken pelvic bone and was probably hit by a car. But it might recover. So I carried him home where he stayed for two days sleeping in a dark corner while we feed him pain pills and hoped for the best. After all I could not let a cat that came to our Christmas Service go to the Animal Shelter and be destroyed. It did not seem right. So we watched him closely and noticed an immense patience, the way this cat seemed able to let go and rest it seems, in his pain and illness. I wanted to ask him: " Who are you? Why did you come back? "

The thought that he might die made me unaccountably sad. After all I barely knew him. Despite our efforts the cat did finally die. I was sad but could not help wondering: Why did he come back here to die? Perhaps that is the lesson of the cat. We may fear what we call the sacred because it reminds us, no matter what we call it, of all those things in this Universe that we cannot control. It shakes us out of our illusion of security. Life, this precious gift we have been given is by nature very fragile and we all come with an expiration date. So why are we here at all? Or rather how come

we wonder about such things? Robert Fulghum writes: "*Every human being asks the elemental religious questions: Who am I? What am I doing here? Where did I come from before birth and what happens after I die? What is right and wrong and how do I know? What is the meaning of life and how do I give meaning to my life? How do I account for the awesome mysterious majesty of the universe and what's my place in the scheme of things? When careful attention is given to these questions, we find answers and hold to these answers with faith and devotion thereby making them sacred to us.*" Fulghum is right. We make things sacred by our attention to them. Religion is a life long quest. And it is easier for us to pay attention to the questions than to live the answers. To live mindfully is simply to pay attention. When we awaken in the morning, eat our breakfast, brush our teeth, take a shower or drink a cup of tea with mindfulness, we are creating sacred time and sacred rituals. Now you may never have thought about brushing your teeth as a ritual. But it is. Rituals develop out of nowhere. In my Seminary when alumni, serious ministers all, gathered for the annual awards dinner it was our ritual to bark instead of applauding. We did surprise a few uninitiated guest speakers this way. Fulghum writes: "*Personal Habits*" is one term we use to describe these repeated patterns. But I say these habits are sacred because they give deliberate structure to our lives. Structure gives us a sense of security. And that sense of security is the ground of

meaning. Rituals flow from the life of the individual into the life of the church. "

Indeed they do. He is right. We will no doubt create our own sacred rituals here that may puzzle newcomers. And it is often the ordinary acts that give life the greatest meaning. On your death bed, I hope, many years from now, what would you regret not having done? Often it is the simple things, hug my kids more, walk my dog more, pick daisies that people wish they had done more of. There is indeed, a time for all things under heaven. A time for the very first breath and a time for the very last. But in the meantime there is the infinite moment.

What happens when we banish the idea of the sacred from our experience? Annie Dillard speaks about that sense of the void in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*.

" Now we are no longer primitive; now the whole world seems not holy. We as a people have moved from pantheism to pan-atheism. It is difficult to undo our own damage and to recall to our presence that which we have asked to leave... We doused the burning bush and cannot rekindle it. We are lighting matches in vain under every green tree. Did the wind used to cry and the hills shout forth praise? Now speech have vanished from among the lifeless things of the earth and living things say very little to very few..(And yet) It could be that wherever there is motion there is noise, as when a whale breaches and smacks the water and

whenever there is stillness there is the small still voice, God speaking from the whirlwind, nature's old song and dance, the show we drove from town...

What have we been doing all these centuries but trying to call God back to the mountain, or failing that, raise a peep out of anything that isn't us? What is the difference between a cathedral and a physics lab? Are they not both saying: Hello?" Hello? Hello?

I love Annie Dillard's words. To me the world is still imbued with the spirit of life, imbued with a sense of something so valuable, so beautiful and terrible at the same time that I can only call it holy. Call me a primitive if you like. Name it God, name it Goddess, call it the Spirit of Life but I confess that I still hear the wind as a voice and consider mountains to be sacred places where one might find a glimpse of the eternal. But we do not have to go somewhere else to find enlightenment. It can be found at the kitchen sink in Thich Nhat Hanh's recipe: *While washing the dishes one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while washing the dishes one should be completely aware of the fact that one is washing the dishes.* At first glance this might seem a little silly: why put so much stress on such a simple thing. But that is precisely the point. To be fully present to the ordinary opens the mind and the heart to wonder. I must admit though, that I have a hard time loading my dishwasher that way. So much in

our existence compete for our attention and as the Sutra says: *The mind is like a monkey swinging from branch to branch through a forest.* Oh, yeah I know that monkey brain well. On too many days my mind is swinging and swinging from one branch to another branch. Too much clutter, too many voices clamoring for attention. It takes a surprise, a paradox, something unexpected to shake me into awareness.

As in this story by James P.Carse. *It happened while I was washing the dishes. It was dark outside, maybe ten o'clock and the old house was sleeping in the quiet. Suddenly I sensed I was not alone. There was a presence of which I was aware. I stopped, stood back from the sink and looked down.*

There was a mouse on my sneaker. She was a half sized mouse only a few weeks old, her body no bigger than her head and obviously not yet wise in the ways of the world of a mouse. She had discovered the treasure of seed and pollen that had accumulated earlier in the day as I was mowing the lawn and it did not matter to her that it was on the shoe of a giant. I shifted my foot about to see what would happen. Nothing. I stamped softly on the floor. Nothing. I took a full step and waved my foot about. She just hung on. There was no interfering with this meal. Then I thought of Charlie the cat. " Look " I said. " There's a whole world of this stuff outside and unless you leave you may become a meal yourself. " But she continued to hang on so I finished the

dishes. I went into the living room to read. She slipped off the shoe but caught the end of the lace. This made for a wild ride but we reached the living room together. Charlie had by now come downstairs to investigate. So I lifted her from my shoe and wrapped her entirely in my hand. Holding her up where I could get a good view of her face I studied it for signs of fear or panic and saw none. Was someone looking at me or was it just that I was being seen? What was I cupping in my hand, some artifice of nature as empty and efficient as a computer chip or another being residing in a mysterious non-space behind those expressionless eyes? Only this seemed certain: I was a reality to her, another being, in a way I can be for no machine. Was she to any degree whatsoever, a reality for herself? So what is the difference between us?

As I carried her out to the yard I explained the risks to her, the owl, the night hunters. But as soon as she discovered that grass was another feast she did not care. I closed the door. I began reading. There was a tiny sensation. Something touched my shoe. She was back. This time I let her alone.

The next time I was in the country my son Jamie volunteered to make a fire. "Dad look at this" he said. "It must have gotten stuck behind the screen." He slid the body of the mouse onto the carpet with the edge of his shoe. I picked her up. For such a tiny corpse, I felt such an immense emptiness. "Who were you?" I

whispered. "

Who? This sermon began with a cat and ended with a mouse. Both are sacred messengers of a sort, intrusions into our ordinary daily lives that make us stop and wonder and question. So I leave you not with a conclusion, but with a prayer adapted from Duncan Howlett. For those of you who stumble over that word, please feel free to call it a poem.

*God of **all things everywhere**, I pretend to know*

*Neither **who** you are nor **what** you are*

*but only that you **are**.*

*For there is round about me **So much of wonder***

***So much of beauty** that I cannot believe*

*my mind and spirit encompass **all** there is to know.*

*You to me are **reality**. That I can neither demonstrate*

Nor see, nor understand; Not personal, nor impersonal,

Yet more real than hunger and the daylight.

*And so **out of my own need**,*

I lift up my heart in prayer

knowing that if my prayer be right and true

it will be answered in the praying

*And I shall leave this place **stronger** because I came*

cleaner** because I prayed and bolder **to carry on

the world's good work when I take it up again. Amen

Amen

