Sermon for July 26, 2026, the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

On Thursday David and I went to see the new documentary about Mary Oliver. [We went to see it in Rockland, but it will be in Portland at the PMA as well as airing on PBS in late August.] The title of the film*, Saved by the Beauty of the World*, is from Mary Oliver herself, who once wrote: "I got saved by poetry, and I got saved by the beauty of the world."

Perhaps I went partly hoping to escape the news—for a respite in the realm of poetry—being deeply fond of many of Mary's poems, as I know many of you are. And of course I looked forward to being immersed in the wonders and beauty of the natural world that Oliver loved so well and entered so fully in her poems.

We who live in Maine know what it's like to feel "saved by the beauty of the world." We live in such a beautiful place; natural beauty for most of us is close by—just out our doors and windows, an easy walk or drive away: the ocean, the sky, clouds, weather, plants and trees, birds and their songs, insects like firefies and butterflies, and so much more!

But even before the Mary Oliver movie got started, the preview for the next film being shown at the theater brought a gut punch, a visceral reminder of what it means to be alive on this planet right now: to both love the natural world that sustains us, to marvel at God's creation, AND to know that this beautiful and abundant earth is also fragile, and that one species—the one with the big brains—continues to imperil the healthy future of the web of life.

The preview was for a movie called *Time and Water*, a documentary that follows Icelandic writer Andri Snaer Magnason, who is best known for writing a eulogy for *Okjokull* (hard to pronounce properly), the first glacier declared dead due to climate change. A plaque installed at the site of the former glacier speaks to the future: "This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it." (OOF. It knocked the breath right out of me.)

Megan Mayhew Bergman, who teaches at Middlebury and is Director of Middlebury's Bread Loaf Writer's Conference, recently wrote about the ache she feels driving by a local heron rookery that has been shrinking over the years and now has only one breeding pair left. She wrote: "I feel an ache that does not seem entirely polite to share. It feels like a contradiction at the center of modern life: we experience profound environmental loss and largely pretend nothing is happening."

No wonder we become numb, feel overwhelmed, unsure what to do or say about what is perhaps best called "climate grief." Whether for a glacier, a heron rookery, or a

neighborhood lot of trees, we see and feel loss. For some, the feelings are too much, almost incapacitating; for others, they may be motivating. Thank goodness that we have SOLUTIONS to focus on: ceiling fans, solar panels, heat pumps, electric cars, batteries, habitat restoration, and more. But meanwhile many of us lug around a heavy weight of grief or something close to grief. And maybe some guilt, and a desire to look the other way. We spend a lot of time juggling these huge forces.

Even in churches, which are institutions and communities with resources for responding to grief, to death and dying; we almost *specialize* in rituals of mourning—but a recent study found that most churches and pastors avoid talking about climate grief. Nearly all of us *feel* it—I'm sure I'm not the only one, right?—but it's hard to talk about it. Perhaps we fear that it's "not entirely polite to share," or that starting to talk about it would open a Pandora's box. That it's too big—and by that, do we mean, even too big for God to help us carry it?!

So here's Jesus, again offering us some slightly strange parables about seemingly ordinary stuff, like this one that's perhaps my favorite of all his parables:

"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with 3 measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

A different translation captures more of the strangeness of the original Greek**: "The reign of God is like leaven** [no packaged yeast!] **which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour until it was all leavened."**

Both because we have heard this parable many times and because our time and place are so different from that of Jesus and his audience, we easily miss the strangest stuff: 1) First, the reign of God is like leaven! Really? In Jewish tradition, leaven was associated with corruption; think of the **unleavened** bread of the Passover meal as the model of holy food. So how is the reign of God like something corrupt? Something not quite holy?

2) Second, the three measures of flour—that's a HUGE amount of flour! Not 3 cups, or 3 quarts, or even 3 gallons of flour. It's about a bushel, about 50 pounds! Three measures of flour for Jesus' audience might have called to mind other biblical stories where "3 measures of flour" alerts the listener that **something big, some work of God,** is happening.

3) And finally, that strange verb, "hid"— the reign of God is like leaven which a woman took and *hid* in the flour until it was all leavened. Can you imagine encountering a recipe that says: take an undisclosed amount a leaven and "hide" it in a bushel of flour? WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?!

When I told our daughter Anna about the parable of the leaven and that I was thinking I'd talk about climate grief, she said, "Um…how are they related?"

To be honest, I'm not entirely sure! But I've gone out on a limb and *thrown them alongside* each other. (The Greek roots in the word "parable" mean "**to throw alongside**," as in, to throw two images alongside each other to start them "talking".) I don't have an easy answer about this; I don't even pretend to fully understand the parable, but it intrigues me, invites our wondering.

Many biblical scholars, at least since 1935, think Jesus' parables were intentionally provocative, perhaps even subversive, their meanings deliberately opaque—meant to engage the imaginations of his listeners, to stir up discussion, participation, perhaps even argument, "to tease the mind into active thought," is how one scholar put it, *to get people talking to each other. Which seems like just what we need*.

I've been thinking so much about those 3 measures of flour, and how heavy they are, how hard to carry, and yet they end up leavened, lightened, raised. Is that like climate grief? And the leaven itself: maybe it's a little "off," a bit embarrassing, not fit for polite company, and deemed unholy. And this very same leaven gets hidden in the flour until it is all leavened and people are fed.

Maybe talking about climate grief is a bit like leaven hidden in a huge pile of flour until it is all leavened by God's hidden working, and we find ourselves somehow lighter for having broken the ice. And we realize we have been fed by connecting with one another; perhaps we find ourselves lighter, leavened, and more ready for action, to roll up our sleeves and do what we know needs to be done.

So I put before you both climate grief and this strange parable and invite your responses, your thoughts, your participation, your stories.

May we find ourselves leavened, fortified with bread and wine and by each other, and by God's presence with us, and by the Spirit who, when we can't find any words, intercedes for us with "sighs too deep for words." And may we roll up our sleeves and keep going, keep doing what we know we need to do.

Amen.