

The Campfires of Gentle People

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46; Philippians 4:4-9

No power seizes quite like the grasp of the gentle.

Indulge me please in a couple of poems, both found on page 7 of your bulletin.

The first is by Mary Oliver entitled, *The Loon*:

Not quite four a.m., when the rapture of being alive strikes me from sleep, and I rise from the comfortable bed and go to another room, where my books are lined up in their neat and colorful rows. How magical they are! I choose one and open it. Soon

I have wandered in over the waves of the words to the temple of thought.

And then I hear outside, over the actual waves, the small, perfect voice of the loon. He is also awake, and with his heavy head uplifted he calls out to the fading moon, to the pink flush swelling in the east that, soon, will become the long, reasonable day.

Inside the house it is still dark, except for the pool of lamplight in which I am sitting.

I do not close the book. Neither, for a long while, do I read on.

No power seizes quite like the grasp of the gentle.

The second poem is, I suspect, pretty familiar. It's by Robert Frost, entitled *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*:

*Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.*

*My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.*

*He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.*

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

Leave it to poets such as Mary Oliver and Robert Frost to capture with their language those moments which have their way of capturing us. The call of the loon. The sweep of easy wind and downy flake. Leave it to the poets to point out to us something that we already know but often ignore – that the world is filled with these quiet, gentle callings. Sights and sounds that beckon us away from our static and chatter and remind us that there is another dimension that surrounds us and quietly argues for its being the real thing. We all have this log of moments when we have stumbled upon the silent, gentle beckoning of the creation. A hike into the mountains and suddenly you stop and you listen and at first you hear nothing, but then you hear something – whatever it is the old world wants you to hear – maybe even a sound you've never heard before. Step into the quiet vaulted expanse of a cathedral and place yourself in a pew and at first there is silence – and then from the chancel comes the sound of the gentle pull of the cellist's bow across the strings and the mournful notes that fill your soul. Taking pause on a sofa with a toddler who holds in her hand a freshly picked flower and with her little

“God speaks loudest when we speak quietest.”

voice she tells you where she found it and why it's so beautiful and why she wants you to have it. And you wish not for that little voice to cease.

Sometimes, maybe most of the time, maybe all of the time – the Creator speaks loudest when he speaks quietest.

You remember that story of the prophet Elijah running away from the terror of the world and he hides himself inside the cleft of a mountain and the good Lord beckons him to the opening of the cave and Elijah braces himself for the appearance of God – and so first comes a great wind so strong that it splits the mountains around him, but storyteller tells us that the God was not in the wind. Then came the earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. Then came the fire, but God was not in the fire. And then came finally ... the still, small voice. And it's then that Elijah knew that God was passing by.

The Creator speaks loudest when the creator speaks quietest.

Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed. The tiniest of the seeds, not much bigger than a grain of sand. The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed out of which grows the largest of all the shrubs. It never dawned on me that part of what Jesus was saying is that the chances of the kingdom of heaven taking root and growing and expanding are infinitely greater when sewn in the smallest of ways. Much greater chance for the seed of the kingdom to slip into the cracks and crevices of your soul and mine when it's so small one can hardly see it.

He should know, I suppose, for it is how he entered

the world. Born to a peasant couple, in a remote village, laid in a cattle trough in front of know-nothing shepherds, – can't get much smaller, quieter than that. God just sort of slips in. Unannounced.

Gentle Mary laid her Child
Lowly in a manger;
There He lay, the undefiled,
To the world a Stranger.

God speaks loudest when God speaks quietest.

So when Jesus came to the tomb of his best friend Lazarus John the Gospel writer tells us that while it could have been a time for preaching and explaining and pontificating – no the biggest thing that people took away from the day was that when Jesus went to the tomb and came face to face with the death of his friend was that Jesus wept. Jesus wept. See how he loved him, the people said. Jesus wept. He spoke without words.

God speaks loudest when God speaks quietest.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, he said. Blessed are the meek, he said. Blessed are the merciful, he said. Blessed are the peacemakers, he said.

We speak loudest, he said, when we speak quietest.

So the apostle Paul sitting in a prison cell is writing to one of his beloved congregations and between the lines one can tell that Paul wonders if for him the end is near. He will soon be martyred. It has been a wild ride, but still things that Paul expected to happen have not happened. He has assumed that Jesus would return and that the kingdom of heaven would envelop kingdoms of the world. He was sure that by now there would be signs that the Church of Christ would have

a foothold in the empire. But all he has to show for it are some scattered congregations, not many more than what he can count on two hands, each a few hundred miles apart from each other.

So with all this what does Paul give as his benediction? He says this: Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Rejoice in the Lord, always. Again, I say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. Of all the admonitions he could have given the Philippians, of all the suggestions he could have made about what might increase the size of their church, of all the programs and communication strategies he could have outlined on his parchment – Paul says to his friends – Rejoice. Rejoice. Be gentle. It is as if to say – we speak loudest when we speak quietest. Rejoice. Be gentle. Let them see something in you that they won't see anywhere else. That while the trumpets blare to Caesar and while the buyers and sellers call loud in the marketplace, and while these people complain and those people moan – you my friends ... rejoice and be gentle. Let the small seed of your gentle joy creep into the souls of those who come your way. The still small voice of your gentleness. The call of the loon. The sweep of easy wind and downy flake. The only way for a tree to grow from underneath the pavement is for the tiny compelling seed of our joy and gentleness to make its way below. Blesses are the meek. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the peacemakers. Rejoice, be gentle. Because by now Paul understands that the world will joyfully fall at the feet of Jesus only as we joyfully fall at the feet of the world. That the greatest in the world will be the servants of the world. The world will only be conquered by gentleness.

Garrison Keillor, humorist and former host of *A Prairie Home Companion*, decades ago was asked by *Life* magazine about the true purpose of life and his answer could have fit just as well in the first century as it does in the twenty-first century. This is what he said:

“To know and to serve God, of course, is why we're here, a clear truth, that, like the nose on your face, is near at hand and easily discernible but can make you dizzy if you try to focus on it hard. But a little faith will see you through. What else will do except faith in such a cynical, corrupt time? When the country goes temporarily to the dogs, cats must learn to be circumspect, walk on fences, sleep in trees, and have faith that all this woofing is not the last word. What is the last word, then? Gentleness is everywhere in daily life, a sign that faith rules through ordinary things: through cooking and small talk, through storytelling, making love, fishing, tending animals and sweet corn and flowers, through sports, music and books, raising kids—all the places where the gravy soaks in and grace shines through. Even in a time of elephantine vanity and greed, one never has to look far to see the campfires of gentle people.”

The campfires of gentle people.

It's tempting to think, isn't it, that with all the bluster and fanfare and talking heads – that somehow that's just the way the world will be. And that somehow the one who shouts loudest will win the day. And yet all through story of God it seems that God appears in the quietest of moments and the quietist of deeds.

A few days after Hurricane Katrina cycloned her way through the gulf coast I was given the chance to make a visit to Waveland, Mississippi to see where the eye of the storm had come ashore. Arriving there all one could see were houses ripped from their foundations, cars overturned, debris scattered, all the worst things you can imagine about a hurricane. I was visiting with a family out in front of what used to be their house when a pickup truck trailing one of those little Bobcat front-end loaders pulled up. The driver parked next to the house, got out of the truck, and began walking toward us. The family members asked me if I knew who this man was. No, I didn't. So the man stopped in front of us and held out his hand. Hi, he said, I'm brother Mike. How can we help you, brother Mike? Oh, said brother Mike, I live up in Florence, South Carolina – and I just couldn't stand seeing one

more picture of what you folks down here are going through. And I looked out at my little Bobcat and said to myself, I bet I can help them. So I hooked her up to my truck and drove all night and you're the first place I stopped. Mind if I do a little clearing for you? Tears filled the eyes of my new friends. And the gentle seed was planted.

On the way later than night as our truck was weaving its way through the small trails of what used to be a neighborhood every 100 yards or so I could see a tent pitched in a clearing – 4-person tent, 6-person tent, 10-person tent – with people inside – shadows amidst the hanging lanterns. And I asked my host about these tents, these people. Are they the victims, the survivors? Some, he said. But most are the helpers. The ones who came just because they had to come. The brother Mikes. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the campfires of gentle people.

Frederick Buechner said that before the gospel is a word it is silence. Love with the sound turned off.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. The smallest of seeds grow into the biggest of bushes. God speaks loudest when we speak quietest.



The Campfires of Gentle People

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Church of the Palms

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