

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany - February 6, 2022

Isaiah 6, Luke 5: "Mollie, a fisher of people"

Rev. Mary Barnett

My earliest friend was a girl named Mollie  
who I met at the beach the summer I turned 3.  
She came and stood at my blanket and smiled down at me...  
She looked huge, framed by the sun from where I sat squinting up at her:  
a gigantically tall 4 year old with strawberry blond hair snapping in the wind  
C'mon she said let's go.  
And then she turned and raced down to the water's edge and  
As I remember it  
I just stood up, like some Simon or Peter,  
left my family and all my possessions:  
my sandy peanut butter sandwich, my green plastic pail and... *my mother*  
I just ran barefoot down to the edge of the water, right down to the edge of my world

Our parents became friends, chasing after us that summer  
as we attempted to throw our 3 and 4 year old selves into the waves unattended  
and we spent the next 15 summers or so racing around in the woods  
and sailing out into the mash of waves and cross currents that is buzzard's bay off the coast massachusetts;  
body surfing through a treacherous adolescence  
and college  
and challenging married lives  
until she died at 54  
Leaving behind 3 beautiful children

It was a horrible death for her  
And a horrible loss for me and for her family  
Even though I have had other important losses  
This one was different

For one thing I didn't get to say goodbye adequately  
I didn't have the courage to push back against her insular family and ask for a place at the small family  
gathering around her hospital bed as she left this world  
And I should have  
I belonged there

Now I know that these moments at the edges of life and death and change are so important

we need to make the most of them  
No one who needs to be there should be kept away  
And yet these past two years of  
Covid has robbed us of many of these moments

And sometimes as result of not being able to be there  
or of simply being afraid of the whole situation, afraid the sorrow will break us  
Our grief instead of overflowing, becomes frozen like petrified wood  
We may carry it with us and in us...for a long time

I was like that after the loss of my brother, after the loss of another friend... a kind of frozen inside

During Mollie's funeral I had to stand up and walk over into a corner.  
I couldn't take her passing sitting down.  
I was angry. I wanted to do something. To protest.  
So many mistakes had been made  
But I think I was also simply afraid, afraid my grief was too much,  
That it would wash me away forever  
So I stood up and squeezed myself into the sharp corner of this small country church  
In a town and even a marriage that I thought furiously was never *big enough for her*  
My eyes as dry and unyielding as stone

And then this song came on:

I the Lord of sea and sky  
I have heard my people cry  
Who will bear my light to them  
Who shall I send

Here I am lord  
And I lost it

That was it.  
That was her.

And finally tears came and came  
Like water rushing in over the top side of a boat  
Because it is so weighted down abundance  
The reality of this abundance which was her

I used to think Mollie should become a minister  
She was a natural for it I thought  
But she had no real pull in that direction  
she was happy raising her kids, being a science teacher that always took her students outside whenever possible  
bringing them back to the classroom covered in mud with stinky jars full of God's glory to analyze in the lab  
She didn't care what denomination she belonged to  
as their family moved around the country following her husband's lumber business  
She would earnestly visited different parishes and finally settle at whatever church felt the most honest and alive  
she didn't need to be a minister because she already was one. already was a ministering to the lady in the check  
out line , the man with the misbehaving dog, the postman with ADD,

*And of course to me*

I was the one who needed to go to school for it  
to learn how to be a better person because I couldn't stand a world without her light in it.

Sometimes I was even jealous that she connected so quickly with others. After all, she was my special person.  
My revelation. The person whose love I knew I could count on. Whose witness I wanted to keep for myself.

But Mollie was a fisher of people, not for christianity sake ....  
Or just Jesus's sake

But for love's sake  
It's who she was

And once I felt the depth of my grief  
That abundance came back to me  
Like water seeping over the gunnels of the boat because the boat is so full

Something about who Mollie was *in herself*  
And who she was specifically *for me*  
Still guides me in a way I can't explain  
It's a light I turn to in the darkness that turns back to me  
A warmth I can still feel

A few months before she died, Mollie and I were looking out over the marshes where the phragmites, hollow  
tubes of marsh grasses, were waving. They are an invasive species, like the cancer that was hollowing her out  
inside

It was a halting conversation, about ultimate things, right there at the edge of the water and at the edge of our  
lives

Why were we here? What was the meaning of it all? Why had we been so hollowed out by loss. What was the  
purpose of it?

Mollie shrugged

I don't know she said, but I think while we are here "We are just meant to be conduits for love," she said.

*I've never found a better explanation than that.*

So what does all this have to do with us  
Back for the first time in a month at CHT  
We should be celebrating not talking about grief  
And yet I believe the two are connected  
The sadness and loss lives on under all the anger and the fear  
And attempts at control  
That we have piled on top of it  
Like so much stinky fish  
Under that Grief  
Is the awareness of abundance  
Let the water come in

*Well, In the OT for today*

Isaiah writes about seraphs with 6 wings each;

two for flying, two to cover their faces, and two to cover their feet.

And I have to say I love the moments when the Bible just breaks out into such a burst of imaginative detail that makes it “Lord of the Rings” movies seem tame

Isaiah is bemoaning his imperfections

woe I am lost, I am a man of unclean lips

When one of the seraphs with the 6 wings

flies down to him, touching his lips with a burning coal from the altar and announcing that he is now cleansed of guilt

cleansed by confession

And by absolution

And I think we have a golden opportunity here today

To revisit all our losses from this never ending time of pandemic

To confess our moments of transgression

To put in their place the hours blinded by fear and anxiety as we tried to pretend we were in control

As we reorient ourselves back to our life in the church after a month away with our hearts open

This word orient has religious roots

To orient is to arrange something so it faces east:

Toward the orient

the rising : the oriri in latin

Where the light comes from

Which is home to many religions’s holy places:

There is an early church tradition that I’d like to try on today, if you are willing

In the early church at special times the congregation would turn to face the back of the church to renounce evil and sin and the devil

And then slowly turns back around to face the altar, in a physical expression of metanoia, of repentance, reorienting towards that light that never goes out

So as I close today

I would like to invite us to step back into an ancient tradition

And face the back of the church

Stand up for a moment and face the back

Is there something from this time of Covid that you would like to put down

Some anger some resistance some nagging fear some frustration some weight of loneliness or grief

See it in your mind’s eye and feel it in your heart

Clench your fists even and then slowly slowly relax them

Breathe in breathe out

And now as one people whose ears have been stoppered and whose hearts have been hardened by the environment of constant fear

Let us take a fresh breath and ask God to Unclench our hearts

And together slowly turn back to the lord

And face the altar where we will receive the eucharist together again and be healed.

Amen.