

"This is What Love Is"

Reading & sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno
February 3, 2013

"Wild, Wild" by Mary Oliver

This is what love is
the dry rose bush the gardener, in his pruning, missed
suddenly bursts into bloom.
A madness of delight; an obsession.
A holy gift, certainly.
But often, alas, improbable.

Why couldn't Romeo have settled for someone else?
Why couldn't Tristan and Isolde have refused
the shining cup
which would have left peaceful the whole kingdom?

Wild sings the bird of the heart in the forests
of our lives.

Over and over Faust, standing in the garden, doesn't know
Anything that's going to happen, he only sees
the face of Marguerite, which is irresistible.

And wild, wild sings the bird.

.....

It is the summer soundtrack of my eighth year. We drive by the Totowa Cinema week after week and week after week the billboard says: *Romeo & Juliet*. I am amazed by this long run. Such an extended run was unusual in 1968. Unheard of in 2013.

I am told only that Romeo and Juliet is a love story. I am not informed of the tragedy. Not aware that it is doom's music; all I hear is lush romance. Really though, what's more romantic than tragedy? So the melodious theme is one of

lush romance and overwhelming tragedy. Who more romantic and tragic than these two?

*For never was a story of more woe
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.*

The story is such a gorgeous blend of tragedy and romance that even if you haven't seen the films or read the play or seen the play you likely know how it turns out. To understate the obvious: it doesn't end well. And although we know this all too well still, we wish for that alternate ending: That Juliet would wake up a moment sooner! That Romeo could reign in his passion and grief for just a moment.

But then what? Happily ever after? These two? At that time? Under those circumstances? Improbable.

Could Romeo have settled for someone else?
Could Tristan & Isolde have refused the shining cup?
Could Faust have resisted Maguerite's face?

(If you don't know, here's all you have to know about the last two: Tristan & Isolde: characters in an opera. Mistaken identity. Star-crossed lovers. International & family feuds. It doesn't end well. Faust & Marguerite: characters in an opera. Mistaken identity. Star-crossed lovers. The devil thrown in for good measure. It doesn't end well.)

Could they have chosen otherwise? The poet might say no, "For wild wild sings the bird of the heart in the forests of our lives."

We are drawn to this wildness. It makes for great theater, after all. If, in fact, Romeo and Juliet had had better timing in that tomb, you wouldn't know the play. It is the wildness in us that so loves the tragedy. So long as the tragedy is someone else's and fictional, that is.

The poem is part cautionary tale. Love, most times a holy gift, sometimes holds a shadow side. Sometimes wildness veils sure tragedy. In the forest of our lives, we fail to see the forest for the heart's wildness.

Our lives aren't fiction. And lives are more peacefully lived with minimal drama. Especially drama we create. True, we can't choose with whom we fall in love. Oh that we could. Oh that our steady-ish minds would play interference with our wild, wild hearts. We are, however, capable of choosing how we respond to that love.

But when a love crosses our hearts that feels like, seems like a holy gift, attention must be paid. Risks must be taken.

Not as Romeo. Not as Juliet, we. Not Tristan, Isidore. Faust? Feh.

We seek love that is holy *and* wild. In the forest of our lives yet, the forest as beauty, as guide. Love that is constructive that keeps tragedy at bay. This is what love is: a holy gift that is beyond measure.

And it requires risk. We know how improbable. We know it may end in tragedy. We know that a long love *will* end in tragedy for as comes joy in the day after day so does come death. Thus the vow: 'till death do us part.

So we must risk. The risk of "yes" to love at its start is earth shaking enough. The risk of saying "yes" to love in the 10th year, in the 13th year, the 27th, the 30th ... equally risky but in a way that is different than the rush of love's first days. We wander through that forest as years go by and sometimes the path we walk together diverges. How to make our way back to each other? Is it possible? Do we make the hard decisions? Or do we sniff out the drama and see if we could choose an alternate reel?

Love is, indeed, a holy gift beyond measure. It remains so when we respond to the great things it asks of us: Sacrifice. Honesty. Forgiveness. Attention. Time.

Time and attention. Even the most hearty Love requires time and attention. The rose bush that the gardener forgot to prune, it may suddenly burst into bloom. It is possible. But really, it's more poetic than possible. Love needs attention, just as sure as do gardens. Neglected, love withers. And not just romantic love, Friends. Love between siblings. Parents and children. Between friends. Souls who are part of a congregation. Love needs attention lest drama bloom because drama seems to not need any tending. Actually, the more we neglect

love, the easier it seems for drama and loneliness to take root and thrive in that parched landscape.

In case you haven't noticed the explosion of pink and red in storefronts everywhere, Valentine's Day is nearing. It is a day of romance, sure. But why not let it be a day when we hold fast to all the people we love. Why not make it a day of tending to the love that continues to capture your wild, wild heart? Why not make it a day of tending to the wild love that needs pruning in order to thrive. Make it a day to love robustly without tragedy. Make it a day to take a risk. To tell someone you love them with holy commitment and tenderness.

For that matter, make it a day when you express your love by getting on a bus, in a car to Hartford where love of community ... love of peace ... inspires you to say no to fear and to violence. Meet them both with holy love and a commitment to a world with sane gun laws.

Wild sings the bird of the heart in the forests / of our lives.
Wild sings the bird.

Wild. Life-giving. Tragic. Improbable. Risky. Holy.

This is what love is.

Amen.