

Life That Flourishes
The Pearl of Great Price
Matthew 13:45-46

You might remember from last year, when our first cohort of Changemakers were going through their nine-month fellowship, hearing from Angela McConnell. Angela was one of our first Changemaker Fellows. Her project was on loneliness. Angela chose her project early; she knew from her own life that it's possible to be very busy and very successful, even mostly happy; and still feel like there's a hole inside of you. To feel like somehow you're missing something essential; you're not as fully *connected* as you long to be.

Using the skills of changemaking, Angela began to talk about her own loneliness—which we don't, usually—and to listen to what other people said about their experiences. The response to Angela's project was immediate, and it was overwhelming. Every time she spoke, people would come to her afterward and tell her their own stories of feeling isolated and alone. Often people with very full lives, but they too felt something missing a distance between themselves and other people, like a bubble that would rise to the surface and remind them of their aloneness.

Angela is the Executive Director of the Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga, and her change making project turned into a year-long focus at Montalvo called *Social: Rethinking Loneliness Together*. All this year, there are events and exhibits connected to this theme. I encourage you to go and see them. But today, I want to tell you about just one of those exhibits, which is open right now. It's called *The Mending Project*. Our Director of Sacred Spaces, Carol Damonte, was there last week, and she took these beautiful photographs you'll see on the screens while I'm talking.

The Mending Project is an interactive exhibit. Visitors are invited to bring with them something that's torn, or that has a hole in it; and right there, the artist in residence goes about the work of mending. While the artist sews, by hand, a conversation begins—about where this piece of clothing came from, where it's been worn, how it was damaged. Why it feels important to repair it, and what its future might be. Out of colorful thread, and sewing, and a flawed piece of cloth, a meaningful, thoughtful, heart-connecting conversation gets woven, while the cloth is being made whole again in the artist's hands.

Afterward, each piece of clothing stays there, just until the end of the exhibit. Every mended piece stays connected to the spool of thread that was used to sew it back together. Connected to the mender who now knows its story. And in a way, each piece is connected to every other piece that has piled up around it. They are bound together by their torn-ness, and their mended-ness, and their connection to that wall of colorful threads that made them whole again.

The piece of clothing that Carol took in to have mended is a 92-year-old dress that belonged to her mother. It had a tear in it where the fabric had aged so thin, that its original threads could not hold it together. This is how it looked after it was mended. By intention, the tear, and the

mending, are still visible, not hidden. You can see the new threads, and underneath them, you can see the tear...like a scar after surgery or stitches.

This is a mended hole where a moth had eaten away at a favorite sweater.

A repair to a tear in pocket of the pants Bob Bolles wears when he works on Habitat for Humanity projects.

I tell you about this project not only because it is beautiful, and creative, and an absolutely brilliant way to invite connections that bridge loneliness. Today I'm thinking that maybe each of those pieces of mended cloth can tell us something about what it means for life to flourish.

What do you think of when you hear the word 'flourishing'? I think about a person, or a thing, whose life is more than just getting by. Fully alive; living with a full measure of something we might call *well-being*. A plant that's flourishing is green, flowering, fruitful. In a person, flourishing is something more than success, or wealth, or physical health; more even than happiness. I have known people whose lives flourish even when they have none of those things. What they do have is some deeply rooted wellness, an *internal* flourishing they carry with them, regardless of their circumstances.

Flourishing is a quality we all want for our lives; right? In the church's new vision statement we say what we believe: "God has this great hope for the world: communities where *life flourishes for everyone*." Jesus said it himself: 'I came so that people—all God's children—might live life *abundantly*.' In the words of *The Message*: "more and better life than they ever dreamed of."

The question is: How do we get that abundant, flourishing life? Because for many of us, we might get a glimpse of it once or twice a year (or maybe not), but it's certainly not how every day feels. Most days, I wish someone would carry *me* into the gentle hands of a mender. I'd welcome some brightly colored thread to stitch up my broken places.

We work so hard. We gather up things and achievements and self-improvements, as if flourishing is something we can work ourselves into...like physical fitness. But maybe that's not how flourishing comes at all. Look for a minute at that very tiny parable Jesus told, that we read a few minutes ago.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. When he found one very precious pearl, he went and sold all that he owned and bought it."

"A merchant in search of fine pearls" sounds to me like someone who has made a life out of surrounding himself with fine things. And then he finds what he's been looking for. Maybe he didn't even know he was looking for it, but there it is: the most exquisite pearl he's ever seen. Indeed, this is the thing that will bring him to flourishing. But it's so valuable, that it cannot simply be *added* to his storehouse of treasures. He has to sell everything else he owns in order to buy this pearl. This is the part that we usually sweep right by when we read this story. But I wonder: weren't there some of those other things he owned that he loved too, and that it pained him to part with? His mother's silver tea set? The house he'd saved for years to buy? The ring

that carried his memory of an old, unfinished love? This is a man who found great treasure, but he also knew the things he'd given up to own it.

And maybe they left a bruise that would still ache a little every time he bumped into it.

A hole that still felt a little ragged.

A scar that would always live right inside the picture of his flourishing.

Maybe *flourishing* is different from perfection, or being unbroken. Maybe flourishing always has losses and holes and tears...and mending...visible in its fabric.

Last year, *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni had a sudden and unexplained stroke in his eye. Suddenly, he could see nothing out of one eye. Bruni muscled up for battle. Twice a week for six months, he injected himself as part of a clinical trial that in the end gave him no relief. He still has no sight in his right eye. At first, he said, he was resigned, stoic, about his now much-higher risk of complete blindness. He made jokes about it. "When God gives you lemons, take a bow," were the words he lived by in the first few months of his fear.

And then, he said, he began to look forward to his injections. "They set me apart, giving my life its own signature rhythm, its own particular grit...It turns out that I'm tougher—more durable—than I knew."

And then he said this: I looked around and saw "how many of the people in my orbit were struggling, how many were bumping up against limits more daunting than mine, how many summoned a grace that gave me something to aspire to, something to emulate. This wasn't as clear to me before, and I found myself thinking less about blindness in my future and more about the blindness in my past."

In a column last week he talked about finding himself in the same room with someone who was clearly having back trouble. They exchanged the usual courtesies, and then Bruni thought, "We can go on like this for another ten minutes or we can have a more meaningful conversation." So he took the risk of asking her about her back. And she told him: what her days were like, and her treatments, and how she'd learned to cope by focusing on the good days and remembering that the bad ones were never permanent. "Would we have had this exchange before my own misfortune?" Bruni asked. And then he says, "I doubt it. I don't just see differently now. I listen differently. I hear more. It's as if I possess this new, extra sense in compensation for the one that's imperiled. It grew with each injection. It grows still."¹

I don't know anything about Frank Bruni's faith, or even if he has faith. But I know this. His experience of finding himself changed for the better through an awful health scare sounds very much like what what's happened to me in the worst experiences of my life. I have been broken and torn apart and scared I would never be the same again. And I have been repaired and mended and turned by hardship into a better version of myself than I knew possible. This is the essence of what we in the Church call *grace*.

¹ Frank Bruni, "I Learned This From Stabbing Myself 52 Times", *The New York Times*, November 3, 2019

The stories that carry us to flourishing aren't hero stories, and they're not victim stories either. They're rescue stories. They're the story of a Mender who finds us and stitches us back together no matter how many tears and holes show up in the fabric of our lives. And that is very good news, because it means that anyone can flourish. Not just the young and strong and able-bodied and highly educated, but *everyone*—because it's the Mender's skill that brings beauty, not ours.

Maybe the secret of flourishing is to live so that the contrasting thread in your mended places shows. Not trying to hide your patches. Not holding yourself apart. But bringing your own particular imperfection to the Mender's table, so that it can tie you to all those other flawed, torn, hole-y lives that are held in the same hands that yours is.