

Praying with Mary Oliver



MONDAY—“Praying”

Does it make a difference in your prayers if you’re paying attention to the blue iris or the weeds in a vacant lot? Do the weeds lead to contemplation of ways to “save” the world as opposed to “savoring”? (As E. B. White said, deciding between the two makes it hard to plan the day!) Or is it just that both the iris & the weeds have their own kind of beauty? Do you tend to contemplate something in nature or something else as a “doorway/ into thanks,” or is it more about emptying your mind? When you pass through that doorway, what are you thankful for today? If that other voice speaks to you out of the silence, what does it have to say?

Praying

It doesn’t have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don’t try
to make them elaborate, this isn’t
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

(Thirst, 2006, 37)



For Additional Reading and Reflection: **Messenger**

My work is loving the world.
Here the sunflowers, there the hummingbird—
equal seekers of sweetness.
Here the quickening yeast; there the blue plums.
Here the clam deep in the speckled sand.

Are my boots old? Is my coat torn?
Am I no longer young, and still not half-perfect? Let me
keep my mind on what matters,
which is my work,

which is mostly standing still and learning to be
astonished.
The phoebe, the delphinium.
The sheep in the pasture, and the pasture.
Which is mostly rejoicing, since all the ingredients are here,

which is gratitude, to be given a mind and a heart
and these body-clothes,
a mouth with which to give shouts of joy
to the moth and the wren, to the sleepy dug-up clam,
telling them all, over and over, how it is
that we live forever.

(Thirst, 2006, 1)

TUESDAY—"The Journey"

In the Mary & Martha story, Jesus tells Mary she is doing "the one thing needful" (listening to Jesus) while Martha is "busy with many things." Soren Kierkegaard said that "Purity of heart is to will one thing." What have you had to give up to "save the only life that you could save"? How does your "one thing" participate in the prayer "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"?

The Journey

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice—
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.

It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do—
determined to save
the only life you could save.

(New and Selected Poems, 1992, 114-115)



WEDNESDAY—“Wild Geese”

If you are “busy with many things” rather than doing “the one thing needful,” how much is that about “being good”? Augustine talks about aligning our desires with God’s desires. Might that help the line about letting “the soft animal of your body love what it loves” feel a little safer? Wendell Berry also has a lot to say about knowing our “place/ in the family of things.” How does that affect your response when “the world offers itself to your imagination”?

Wild Geese

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert
repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your
body
 love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell
you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of
the rain

are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean
blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and
exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

(New and Selected Poems, 1992, 110)

THURSDAY—“On Thy Wondrous Works I Will Meditate (Psalm 145)” (sections 4, 5, 6, 8)

Why does Oliver include “grief’s shock and torpor, its near swoon” along with the beautiful mysteries she lists? How is the desire to be good different in this poem? How is God both the Lord of melons and of mercy? What “wondrous works” of God will you meditate on today?

On Thy Wondrous Works I Will Meditate (Psalm 145)—Sections 4, 5, 6, 8

4.

How many mysteries have you seen in your
 lifetime? How many nets pulled
full over the boat’s side, each silver body
 ready or not falling into
submission? How many roses in early summer
 uncurling above the pale sands then
falling back into the unfathomable
 willingness? And what can you say? Glory
to the rose and the leaf, to the seed, to the
 silver fish. Glory to time and the wild fields,
and to joy. And to grief’s shock and torpor, its near swoon.

5.

So it is not hard to understand
where God's body is, it is
everywhere and everything; shore and the vast
fields of water, the accidental and the intended
over here, over there. And I bow down
participate and attentive

it is so dense and apparent. And all the same I am still
unsatisfied. Standing
here, now, I am thinking
not of His thick wrists and His blue
shoulders but, still, of Him. Where, do you suppose is His
pale and wonderful mind?

6.

I would be good—oh, I would be upright and good.
To what purpose? To be shining not
sinful, not wringing out of the hours
petulance, heaviness, ashes. *To what purpose?*
Hope of heaven? Not that. But to enter
the other kingdom: grace, and imagination,

and the multiple sympathies: to be as a leaf, a rose,
a dolphin, a wave rising
slowly then briskly out of the darkness to touch
the limpid air, to be God's mind's
servant, loving with the body's sweet mouth—its kisses, its
words—
everything.

8.

Every morning I want to kneel down on the golden
cloth of the sand and say
some kind of musical thanks for
the world that is happening again—another day—
from the shawl of wind coming out of the
west to the firm green

flesh of the melon lately sliced open and
eaten, its chill and ample body
flavored with mercy. I want
to be worthy of—what? Glory? Yes, unimaginable glory.
O Lord of melons, of mercy, though I am
not ready, nor worthy, I am climbing toward you.

(*Thirst*, 2006, 55)

FRIDAY—“Six Recognitions of the Lord” (sections 4 & 5)

How do you reconcile your love of this world and “the other world”? What does that have to do with following Jesus?

Six Recognitions of the Lord (4 & 5)

4.

Of course I have always known you are present in the clouds, and the black oak I especially adore, and the wings of birds. But you are present too in the body, listening to the body, teaching it to live, instead of all that touching, with disembodied joy. We do not do this easily. We have lived so long in the heaven of touch, and we maintain our mutability, our physicality, even as we begin to apprehend the other world. Slowly we make our appreciative response.

Slowly appreciation swells to astonishment. And we enter the dialogue of our lives that is beyond all understanding or conclusion. It is mystery. It is love of God. It is obedience.

5.

Oh, feed me this day, Holy Spirit, with the fragrance of the fields and the freshness of the oceans which you have made, and help me to hear and to hold in all dearness those exacting and wonderful words of our Lord Christ Jesus, saying:
Follow me.

(Thirst, 2006, 26)

SATURDAY—“The Vast Ocean Begins Just Outside Our Church: The Eucharist” and “Thirst”

When has your body whispered to you that you have seen Jesus? How does communion with the body of Christ in the family of faith contribute to this?

The Vast Ocean Begins Just Outside Our Church: The Eucharist

Something has happened
to the bread
and the wine.

They are something else now
from what they were
before this began.

And clearly
someone else
besides.

They have been blessed
What now?
The body leans forward

I want
to see Jesus,
maybe in the clouds

On hard days
I ask myself
if I ever will.

To receive the gift
from the priest’s hand,
then the chalice.

Or on the shore,
just walking,
beautiful man

Also there are times
my body whispers to me
that I have.

(Thirst, 2006, 24)

Thirst

Another morning and I wake with thirst
for the goodness I do not have. I walk
out to the pond and all the way God has
given us such beautiful lessons. Oh Lord,
I was never a quick scholar but sulked
and hunched over my books past the hour
and the bell; grant me, in your mercy,
a little more time. Love for the earth
and love for you are having such a long
conversation in my heart. Who knows what
will finally happen or where I will be sent,
yet already I have given a great many things
away, expecting to be told to pack nothing,
except the prayers which, with this thirst,
I am slowly learning.

(Thirst, 2006, 69)

