

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Fourth Sunday of Pentecost/Ordinary Time – June 5, 2016 – Communion
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Luke 7:11-17

For Reflection

“You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough.”

— Mae West (1893–1980) American actress, playwright, screenwriter

“In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life: it goes on.”

— Robert Frost (1874-1963) American Poet

This One Life

“The Summer Day”

By Mary Oliver

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean-
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
**Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?**

This text from Luke is Midrash. It refers to ancient events and texts in order to make connections and deepen the significance of the main character – namely Jesus. In 1 Kings 17 the prophet Elijah resurrected the son of a widow and “gave him to his mother” – a phrase directly quoted in Luke 7:15. We are supposed to realize that Jesus was a prophet, perhaps even the second coming of Elijah. But this Midrash goes further. The crowd experiences **fear** – an emotion that denotes awareness of a divine visitation. So, beyond prophet, Jesus is a divine messenger – straight from G-d.

And then there are the elements of the story that speak to the character and message of Jesus himself. The loss of an only son is a financial catastrophe for a widow; without a man to support her, she is also likely to die. When Jesus sees her, he has a deep visceral response to her – **compassion** – counterpoint to the fear of the crowd.

And then he does something outrageous: he breaks purity laws by touching the coffin. Men – especially holy men – never touch death. That’s why women wash the bodies and are responsible for the burial of bodies and the tending of the cemetery gardens. It’s why the first women’s fellowships met in the cemetery gardens. Jesus TOUCHED the coffin. That’s huge.

And then the son comes to life again – he’s restored to his mother – and life goes on.

It is an extremely rare occurrence – someone dying and then coming back to life. It’s not something any living creature can count on. The thing about cats having nine lives? It’s a rumor based on their agility – the fact that they survive things most of us shouldn’t. But once they are dead, they are dead. I know that from experience.

So it is essential that we understand that we have one life – one precious life – and make choices that allow us to live that life fully and meaningfully – no matter how long or short our days are.

Jessica Ito was 15 when she finally died of cancer. But during the years she fought the disease, she really lived. Whenever she was in the hospital, she would find out the birthdays of the nurses and other patients and make sure they were celebrated. She encouraged other kids to fight the disease as hard as they could. Her favorite character was Tigger from Winnie the Pooh – so she made a plan with her parents to create a “Tigger Room” at City of Hope – a place for kids and teens to hang out and just be kids together. When she was in school, she was a top student and on the cheerleading squad. And when we laid her to rest, the squad was there to do a cheer for her and throw flowers into her grave.

Because of Jessica, her mom, Janie, went to seminary – and is now a UCC chaplain on the oncology ward at Children’s Hospital. Jessica’s life was full and meaningful – and made a huge impact on the lives of everyone around her. That’s how you do it.

And we are all aware that Muhammad Ali,

the silver-tongued boxer and civil rights champion who famously proclaimed himself "The Greatest" and then spent a lifetime living up to the billing, died on Friday...

Born in 1942, he started boxing when he was 12, winning Golden Gloves titles before heading to the 1960 Olympics in Rome, where he won a gold medal as a light heavyweight...

As his profile rose, Ali acted out against American racism. After he was refused services at a soda fountain counter he threw his Olympic gold medal into a river.

Inspired by Malcolm X, one of the leaders of the Nation of Islam (American), he converted in 1963.

And when he was drafted to fight in the Vietnam War, he refused to go saying, "My conscience won't let me go shoot my brother, or some darker people, some poor, hungry people in the mud, for big powerful America, and shoot them for what?" Ali said in an interview. "They never called me nigger. They never lynched me. They didn't put no dogs on me."

He was sentenced to 5 years for draft evasion, but was cleared by the Supreme Court on appeal – finding him to be motivated by his religion after all.

He suffered from Parkinson’s disease for 32 years – but never wanted pity.

Even as his health declined, Ali did not shy away from politics or controversy, releasing a statement in December criticizing Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump's proposal to ban Muslims from entering the United States. "We as Muslims have to stand up to those who use Islam to advance their own personal agenda," he said.

<http://www.nbcnews.com/news/sports/muhammad-ali-greatest-all-time-dead-74-n584776>

He was divorced three times, but the last marriage stuck. He had nine children.

And a few of his most famous sayings are probably these:

“Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.”

“He who is not courageous enough to take risks will accomplish nothing in life.”

and

“The man who views the world at 50 the same as he did at 20 has wasted 30 years of his life.”

It is hard to believe that Muhammad Ali wasted a single second of his life.

My father has late onset Parkinson's – possibly brought on by a fall in the shower when he hit his head. If blows to the head bring on the disease, it is no wonder Ali had early onset. My dad isn't one to give in either. He was never a boxer – but he was an activist like Ali – and much like a bulldog when it came to conscientious objection and saving the planet from human destruction.

His doctor told him that in order to create new neural connections to counter those taken by the disease, Dad needed to learn a new skill every six months. His wife suggested that the first skill be learning to clean the house – which he did. She then bought him a keyboard to learn piano – which he continues to do with weekly lessons. His next choice was cooking – something my sister helped him with (as I am hopeless when it comes to food). A college cookbook for men got him started – but he has gone beyond that – and is fascinated with taste combinations and visual presentation. He has to allow 3 times the amount of time indicated by the recipe – but he is tenacious. And we are all benefiting from his skill building.

It is never too late or too early to choose to live life to the limits. Jesus lived 33 wild and precious years – only 3 of them in the public light – and look at his legacy. Jessica had 15 years – my Dad is still going at 88 – each of us has what we have and can give what we can give to this one life.

What are we going to choose to do with it?
G-d really wants to know...

Scripture Reading for Sunday June 5, 2016 – Pentecost 4 – Year C

Luke 7:11-17

11 Soon afterwards he went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went with him. 12 As he approached the gate of the town, a man who had died was being carried out. He was his mother's only son, and she was a widow; and with her was a large crowd from the town. 13 When the Lord saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, "Do not weep." 14 Then he came forward and touched the bier, and the bearers stood still. And he said, "Young man, I say to you, rise!" 15 The dead man sat up and began to speak, and **Jesus gave him to his mother.** 16 Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, "A great prophet has risen among us!" and "God has looked favorably on his people!"

17 This word about him spread throughout Judea and all the surrounding country.