

**Claire Feingold Thoryn**

Theme: "Gratitude"

Homily: "**Brief Moments, Long Hauls**"

**November 15, 2015 (Membership Sunday)**

**Call to Worship:**

Our world is filled with so much beauty and brokenness,  
And here we gather seeking hope.  
The chalice we light this morning is a beacon of hope  
In a world that needs its light.  
That people with differences can come together  
In love, in honesty, seeking justice and peace.

**Reading: "Equinox" by Barbara Crooker**

Another October. The maples have done their slick trick  
of turning yellow almost overnight; summer's hazy skies  
are cobalt blue. My friend has come in from the West,  
where it's been a year of no mercy: chemotherapy, bone  
marrow transplant, more chemotherapy, and her hair  
came out in fistfuls, twice. Bald as a pumpkin.  
And then, the surgeon's knife.  
But she's come through it all, annealed by fire,  
calm settled in her bones like the morning mist in valleys  
and low places, and her hair's returned, glossy  
as a horse chestnut kept in a shirt pocket.  
Today a red fox ran down through the corn stubble;  
he vanished like smoke. I want to praise things  
that cannot last. The scarlet and orange leaves  
are already gone, blown down by a cold rain,  
crushed and trampled. They rise again in leaf meal  
and wood smoke. The Great Blue Heron's returned to the pond,  
settles in the reeds like a steady flame.  
Geese cut a wedge out of the sky, drag the gray days  
behind them like a skein of old wool.  
I want to praise everything brief and finite.  
Overhead, the Pleiades [plee-ah-deez] fall into place; Orion rises.  
Great Horned Owls muffle the night with their calls;  
night falls swiftly, tucking us in her black velvet robe,  
the stitches showing through, all those little lights,  
our little lives, rising and falling.

## **Sermon: Brief Moments, Long Hauls**

I want to praise things that cannot last.  
I want to praise everything brief and finite.  
I am grateful for the right now.  
I am grateful for the not yet.  
I am grateful for this moment.

Last week I talked about how I understand the idea of being blessed. “Blessed” is a complicated word. Sometimes people use it to mean they are happy, but the way I understand it is more than just happy. Blessed is a bone-deep kind of happiness.

“Happy” is a smile.

“Blessed” is a belly-laugh.

“Happy” is eating a cookie.

“Blessed” is feeling full, nourished, whole.

We can feel blessed even when we aren’t really “happy.”

I think a lifelong spiritual practice is seeking to find gratitude even in the hardest times. Not in a way that denies the sadness or suffering or grief. But in a way that pulls in the complexity of sadness mixed with joy, grief mixed with blessedness.

As Blake said, joy and woe are woven fine.

I was reminded of this again yesterday. As the news, Facebook and Twitter exploded with updates about the terrorist attacks in Paris, I was shocked and horrified, and also personally afraid, because good friends of mine, Allison and Jim, had travelled there the day before for a friend’s wedding.

I was deeply grateful to learn that Allison, Jim, and their friends were okay. And I was grateful again, when they posted a picture of the wedding couple on Saturday morning. All the public and government buildings in Paris are closed, everything is cancelled...except previously scheduled wedding ceremonies. The couple got married. Love wins.

11 years ago I was a ministerial intern in a congregation, just like our intern Hillary. I moved to New Jersey for this internship, moved apartments, bought my first car, I was totally nervous and alone. And two members of this congregation, a man named Ron and his wife of 40 years, Cathy, took me under their wing. They fed me meals, told me jokes, told me I was gonna be okay.

Ron was a short man with a huge heart. He said his ministry was to bring back puns, and he always had a good one—or a bad one, depending on how you look at it—ready to go. Ron was always ready to listen, to laugh, to praise. He was not a big shot, or “important,” or wealthy or famous. He was just: a good, good man. Maybe you know someone like that. Maybe you are someone like that.

A few years ago he had a surgery that was supposed to be routine, and a few days

later, as he was healing, a sudden blood clot was thrown into his blood stream, and it stopped his heart. It shouldn't have happened. But it did. He was 61 when he died.

A friend of the family called me to let me know what was happening just because she knew I would care. She had no idea that instead of being in Massachusetts, I was on a clergy retreat in New Jersey only a half hour away. I left the retreat, and went over to cry and pray and be with Ron and his family.

I felt angry and sad and numb and in denial. And I felt stunned by the grace that had led me to this place. Even as I wept, I felt blessed that I had such a friend in my life, at a time when I really needed exactly that friendship, someone who had accompanied me and lifted me up and mentored me and made me laugh during a hard time in my life. I felt blessed that I could hold Ron's hand, hold Cathy's hand, and cry with their children. At his funeral, we told a lot of horrible puns, and we laughed until we cried.

I want to praise things that cannot last.  
I want to praise everything brief and finite.

A more famous funny man is Stephen Colbert. Stephen Colbert is now the host of the Late Show, and he is known for his genuinely joyful humor as much for his social commentary. He has said that the best advice he got as a comedian was "You have to learn to love the bomb."<sup>1</sup> That doesn't mean an actual bomb, it means "to bomb" as an artist, to fail spectacularly.

Colbert said,

"It took me a long time to really understand what that meant.  
It wasn't 'Don't worry, you'll get it next time.' It wasn't 'Laugh it off.'  
No, it means what it says. You gotta learn to *love* when you're failing...  
The embracing of that, the discomfort of failing in front of an audience,  
leads you to penetrate through the fear that blinds you."

I really resonate with that—though I don't have a nightly opportunity to fail in front of a national audience, I do have a weekly opportunity on a smaller scale. And if any of us who put together these services were afraid of failing, afraid that the sermon would bomb, or the music would bomb, or the prayer would bomb, or even that our heartfelt sharing at Joys and Sorrows was a bomb—well, that could stop us from even trying. So you have to learn to love the bomb. There is always another Sunday.

But that learning to love the bomb means something even deeper for Colbert. When he was 10 years old, he suffered a terrible loss: his father and two older brothers were killed in a plane crash. Stephen was the youngest, still living at home with his mom, and he and his mom were left to sort through their grief together.

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<sup>1</sup>All of the Colbert quotes are from GQ magazine, August 17, 2015 by Joel Lovell.  
<http://www.gq.com/story/stephen-colbert-gq-cover-story>

An interviewer asked Colbert:

...how it could possibly be that he suffered the losses he's suffered and somehow arrived here. It's not just that he doesn't exhibit any of the anger or open-woundedness of so many other comedians; it's that he appears to be so genuinely grounded and joyful.

[He took a long time to answer the interviewer.]

And then he looked him in the eye and gave him a real answer.

“The answer is: my mother. ...And, the world. It's so...lovely. I'm very grateful to be alive, even though I know a lot of dead people.”

[...Colbert continued,] “And that act, that impulse to be grateful, wants an object. That object I call God.

It was just me and Mom for a long time, and by her example I am not bitter.

By *her* example. She was not. Broken, yes. Bitter, no.”

[Colbert's mother] drew on her faith that the only way to not be swallowed by sorrow [is to] recognize that our sorrow is inseparable from our joy...

“Acceptance is not defeat. Acceptance is just awareness. You gotta learn to love the bomb.”

[Colbert said]:

“Boy, did I have a bomb when I was 10. That was quite an explosion.

And I learned to love it. ... That might be why you don't see me as someone angry and working out my demons onstage. It's that I love the thing that I most wish had not happened.”

I want to praise things that cannot last.

I want to praise everything brief and finite.

This past week was Veterans' Day, a complicated holiday of loss and gratitude. Garry Trudeau is the author of the comic strip *Doonesbury*, which has followed its characters through all kinds of contemporary events and issues, including the wars that America has engaged in. If you've read it, you know he manages to be both brutally honest and funny.

When the character B.D. calls to tell his wife he's lost his leg, he says:

“Well, the good news is I'm down to my ideal weight...”

Trudeau gives his strip authenticity by staying connected to the veteran community and hearing their stories directly. One of the first soldiers Garry Trudeau ever spoke to was a 27-year-old MP named Danielle Green. She had been a college basketball star, a left-handed point guard at Notre Dame. Green had just lost that hand in Iraq. She'd been on the roof of a police station, behind sandbags, trying to defend it from enemy fire, when she took a direct hit from a rocket-propelled grenade.

Trudeau spoke about his conversation with Danielle:

“This was an elite athlete, and she’d lost her whole professional identity, but that’s not what she wanted to talk about.

What she wanted to talk about was how her buddies carried her down, put her on the hood of a Humvee, where they stopped the bleeding, then went back up to the roof, against orders, and found her hand buried under sandbags.

They took off her wedding ring and gave it to her. She’s telling me this with a million-dollar smile. This was not about bitterness or loss.

It was about gratitude.”<sup>2</sup>

I want to praise things that cannot last.

I want to praise everything brief and finite.

I’ll end with an update from my friend Allison in Paris. Late on Saturday, she wrote:

“It is 2 am Paris time and I am trying to find the words to describe this day.

We gathered this morning in front of the government offices, fraught and tentative, but together. The ceremony had some tears and grief but there was joy and celebration and love.

The original after-plan was no longer possible and thus arose an impromptu house party at the bride and groom’s, and from nothing there came forth champagne and cheese and charcuterie and so much love and camaraderie...and of course we danced (most are still dancing!)

We are all mortal and we don’t know when our time will come but in celebration of love and life, we are here, friendships enduring across nations and oceans and lifespans. We are together.

I have never once taken for granted how much my life changed for the better when I met [these friends] and I love these people with my whole heart.

There is no other place for us to be but here, right now, together, no matter what.

Our dearest [friend] is married and we are glad to be here with her in the beauty of this day.”

Let us praise things that cannot last.

Let us praise everything brief and finite.

I am grateful for the right now

for the not yet

for this moment.

I am grateful for you.

*Amen.*

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<sup>2</sup> From Gene Weingarten’s article in the Washington Post, “Doonesbury’s War,” October 22, 2006. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-content/article/2006/10/20/AR2006102000446.html>

