

SERMON for January 6, 2019

**WHAT THE WILD THINGS ARE:
*Our Childhoods of Pure Possibility***

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READINGS (printed below, after the sermon)

<u>Gathering</u>	from Shakespeare's <i>Twelfth Night</i> and Tina Fey's <u>Bossypants</u>
<u>Invocation</u>	<i>Gratitude for the Sun and the Dawn</i> (Hymnal Reading #515)
<u>Reading</u>	<i>On the Twelfth Night of Christmas</i> , from the Gospels of Matthew 2 & Luke 2
<u>Reading</u>	<i>In Spite of Everything – Epiphanies 1943 & 1944</i> , from <u>The Diary of Anne Frank</u>

SERMON

On the tenth day of Christmas, just off Highway 10 near the great gambling city of Biloxi, Mississippi, we passed a park full of mobile homes. On the park's frontage was a little play mobile home, with a manger scene in front of it – Mary and Joseph in adoration over baby Jesus in a crib. Somebody in the mobile home park was reminding us of something sacred – families with newborn children. And Mary and Joseph - if they hadn't known before, they knew now the holy perfection of parents around a child of pure possibility. And in awe they might have admitted, Yes, and we have our work cut out for us, to help this child's possibilities come to fulfillment in these times. Yes, and isn't it always so?

Yet what epiphanies of hope there are around a newborn child. You may have felt them in your life, even about yourself if you've been born again once or twice. Mary and Joseph felt it. The magi felt it. The shepherds, Simon, Anna, the populus, even Herod felt it – and maybe even the cows and camels and sheep felt it. And the sheep dogs – sheep dogs love babies.

Biologists would tell us that the primary characteristics of living beings are their potentials to survive and then to thrive – to grow, organize, and reproduce. Psychologists have given us a variety of descriptions of these potentials and their growth. Erikson's sequence for potential fulfillments from childhood merging into adulthood runs like this:

our potential for hope derived from our senses of trust and distrust;
our potential for will derived from our senses of autonomy and self-doubt;
our potential for purposefulness derived from our senses of initiative and reserve;
our potential for productivity derived from our senses of competence and inferiority;
our potential for fidelity derived from our senses of identity and role confusion; our potential for love derived from our senses of intimacy and isolation;
our potential for caring derived from our senses of generativity and impotency; our potential for wisdom derived from our senses of integrity and despair.

Others are not dissimilar – with Maslow calling the whole process “actualization,” with potentials for creativity and transcendence acknowledged; with Kohlberg seeing the process as the development of a sense of justice; with Gilligan noting the incompleteness of justice without the dimension of caring for self, others, and all.

For me, these systems of human potential and fulfillment condense to fulfilling our potentials to understand life, to care for life, and to commune with life. (If you don’t have your own condensation, you are welcome to mine.) All of these characteristics are fundamental to the human character, the human spirit.

The first cry of a baby announces the arrival of new grace, new potential. And for the sheepdog, that is something to be heard and to herd, which is just what the baby needs. Baby potentials need some shepherding. Epiphanies of profound insight and fulfillment come constantly through childhood as the world watches over right up into adulthood.

For example, we have the story of the boy Jesus growing and going forth prematurely as youth will do and adults will judge. When he was at the temple at age 12, probably for his *bar mitzvah*, he momentarily rather abandoned his parents in his youthful eagerness to begin study of his life’s work - all children’s life work - to live as evidence of the Truth as he saw it – the truth, I would call it, of divine grace alive in all things.

At about the same age Anne Frank writes in her diary of her parents going into hiding from the German Nazi forces occupying the Netherlands and thereafter of their life in hiding. The two years of diary entries give a thrilling sense of childhood potentials coming to fruition in Anneliese Marie Frank: her feeling for human tragedy, her search for the meaning of the human soul, her testing of humanity’s highest ideals, her clear, seeing even in herself even as the world collapsed, of the contradictions that occupy the human spirit. There is hardly a book I know that evidences more fully the greatness of human potential and the loss from their termination.

When I was a naïvely free boy of those same ages, around twelve, several friends and I would sometimes bicycle the four or five miles past Walden Pond to a wildlife sanctuary to see the injured animals cared for there. One time by the lake, while the director was giving us a tour, we saw several ducks attacking another duck. Horrified, we asked the director what we should do. “Oh, nothing, really” she said rather gently. “They’re trying to fertilize her.” I was puzzled, but I remember clearly how gently she held us in her gaze, realizing we had no idea what she was talking about.

Some years later I discovered that she and her occupational therapist daughter, had published a book subtitled Nature as Teacher, Messenger, and Intermediary –based on experiences of the sanctuary staff introducing the injured wild animals as healers and teachers for visitors and for residents of orphanages, hospitals, and nursing homes.

One story I love is about a six year old girl and her mother visiting the sanctuary on a snow-covered winter day. As they walked, a radiant red fox came out of her burrow and trotted over the snow like moving fire. The captivated little girl asked, "Is she tame?" The director replied, "She knows us; trusts us as we work with her and feed her, and the dogs play with her – yet even so, she still has, and will always have, a very wild place inside her. We need to respect this wildness." Then the little girl turned to her mother and said quite clearly, "I have that place too, and you should know about it." Wildness.

In Maurice Sendak's Where the Wild Things Are, the young boy Max discovers that the wild things are within and that in dreams the wild child may have access to these wild things – creatures of myth – wolves and minotaurs, loud and fierce and untamed, except by the child who rules them – the very child who can also be called back to everyday reality by human love and understanding and care. Wildness – energy - potential – not tamed, but aimed.

The Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield tells a story about a family at a restaurant where the waitress asked the boy for his order and when he said "A hotdog," his mother overrode him saying, "He'll have the meatloaf, mashed potatoes and vegetables." The waitress looked from mother to son and said, "You want mustard and relish with the dog?" When she went off to the kitchen, the boy said to his parents, "She thinks I'm real."

There is something about the wild place and being real that is where childhood potential lives and has its hope for the salvation – that is, the fulfillment - of the soul, and the world.

In Shakespeare's day, the 12th day and night of Christmas was the merriest of parties, often societally quite topsy-turvy and wild rather than grave with gratitude to a savior. The plot turns on several key cases of mistaken identity and mistaken perception. It is not until trustworthy clarity of vision is achieved – that is, not until the characters experience epiphanies as to the nature of reality in their souls and worlds - can they determine who to trust or what to do. When they see clearly through all disguises, they find love, belonging, respect, wisdom and fulfillment of their best selves. "She thinks I'm real."

When we speak of the worth and dignity of every person, is it not this wild potential and its development that we refer to, this mix of independence and communion? Is it not this wild untamed potential whose growth we commit to encourage in a spirit of justice, equity and compassion? Is it not these seeds of soul that we are to help in their growth in meaning and truth?

For every child, for every person, for every being, do we not seek the fulfillment of potentials in the fullness of spirit, of character, that grows as understanding and caring and manifests in the spread of happiness and goodness? Recent research into empathy and altruism indicates that children are born with an innate capacity for empathy that, in time, cultivated with a maturing moral sense, gives them the capacity of altruistic behavior. By age two, children can discern another's feelings from their own and respond to the other.

This we can say, I think, is the potential spirit of the child – nourished by our grace, that keeps flowing like mother’s milk as long as it is given and received - the capacity to discern who and what are trustworthy and dependable, to discern who and what will meet our needs, who will respond to us with understanding and caring. Children might experience this as a baptism by the fire of emotions which baptism by water seeks to sooth and refresh.

And the children have the potential to become aware that they are part of things – are in communion - and can take our part and fulfill tasks and expectations - and that they have potential to be trustworthy themselves and meet expectations and understand what is expected.

In sum, it seems fair to conclude that from birth we have the potentials needed to understand life and the potentials to care for life in ourselves and the world so our fulfillment will be health, happiness, helpfulness, and even that profound interconnectedness that we call holiness.

The questions we are left to ponder, I believe, are then:

- 1) Have you developed these potentials so they are part of your character, your spirit – and can you keep on?
- 2) What influence have the peoples of the world had on children’s potentials to date? Is it good enough? What would be better?

Till next Sunday, thank you for pondering.

READINGS

Gathering from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* and Tina Fey’s Bossypants

“Be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and others have greatness thrust upon them ... In nature there’s no blemish but the mind. None can be called deformed but the unkind.” William Shakespeare, Twelfth Night (or, What You Will)

“Cost-free techniques for raising an achievement-oriented, obedient, drug-free, virgin adult: Calamity, Praise, Local Theater, Flat Feet, Strong Father Figure (Fear Thereof).” - from Bossypants by Tina Fey

Invocation *Gratitude for the Sun and the Dawn* (Hymnal Reading #515)

Reading *On the Twelfth Night of Christmas, from the Gospels of Matthew 2 & Luke 2*

After Jesus was born, shepherds in the Bethlehem hills were keeping watch over their flocks and an angel of Yehovah stood before them and divine glory shone around them and the shepherds were terrified. But the angel said, "Fear not, I bring good news of great joy for all. To you this day is born in the city of David a savior who is the Messiah." And the shepherds went, and saw, and praised God.

And Persian magi came to Jerusalem, saying, "Please tell us where is the child born king of the Jews, so we may go pay homage." They were sent to Bethlehem and there they saw the child's star above a house and they found the child and mother. Overwhelmed with joy, they knelt and paid homage, offering gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

After forty days, in accord with the Law, Jesus' parents took him up to Jerusalem to be dedicated to serve God. In the temple, a righteous and devout man named Simeon took the baby in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Now my eyes have seen Israel's salvation and a light of revelation to the nations.' And an aged prophet named Anna began to praise God and to speak about the child to all those looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Mary and Joseph returned to Nazareth and the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom and the gracious power of Yehovah, Being of all beings.

Reading *In Spite of Everything – Epiphanies 1943 & 1944, from The Diary of Anne Frank*

"Wednesday, 13 January, 1943. Dear Kitty,

"Everything has upset me again this morning.... It is terrible outside. Day and night more of those poor miserable people are being dragged off.... Families are torn apart, the men, women, and children all being separated.... Everyone is afraid."

"Thursday, 6 January 1944. Dear Kitty,

"My longing to talk to someone became so intense that somehow or other I took it into my head to choose Peter.... He has a mania for crossword puzzles at the moment... and yesterday I helped him with them and we soon sat opposite each other at his little table. It gave me a queer feeling each time I looked into his deep blue eyes, and he sat there with that mysterious laugh playing round his lips.... and with my whole heart I almost beseeched him: oh, tell me, what is going on inside you, oh can't you look beyond this ridiculous chatter? But the evening passed and nothing happened, except that I told him about blushing –... just so that he would become more sure of himself as he grew older."

"Saturday, 15 July, 1944. Dear Kitty,

"Is it true then that grownups have a more difficult time here than we young people do? No, I know it isn't true. It's twice as hard for us young ones to hold our ground and maintain our opinions in a time when all ideals are being shattered and destroyed, when people are showing their worst side.... Yet in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart.... I hear the ever approaching thunder, which will destroy us too; I can feel the sufferings of millions; and yet, I must uphold my ideals, for perhaps the time will come when I shall be able to carry them out."

"Tuesday, 1 August, 1944 (Anne Frank's last diary entry).

"Dear Kitty, Forgive me, they haven't given me the name 'little bundle of contradictions' all for nothing! ... A voice sobs within me, saying to me: 'There you are, that's what's become of you; you're uncharitable, you look supercilious and peevish, people dislike you and all because you won't listen to the advice given you by your own better half... so that the bad is on the outside and the good is on the inside and keeps on trying to find a way of becoming what I would so like to be, and what I could be, if ... there weren't any other people living in the world. Yours, Anne"