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UU Stockton, Sunday Service 7/30/17 "Summertime: Wabi Sabi?"

Rev. Armida Alexander

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READINGS 7/30/17

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Ecc 3:20 All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust.

Tao Te Ching #56

Those who know don't talk.

Those who talk don't know.

Close your mouth,  
block off your senses,  
blunt your sharpness,  
untie your knots,  
soften your glare,  
settle your dust.  
This is the primal identity.

Be like the Tao.  
It can't be approached or withdrawn from,  
benefited or harmed,  
honored or brought into disgrace.  
It gives itself up continually.  
That is why it endures.

Also — excerpt from Winnie the Pooh, in which Christopher Robin tells Pooh that his favorite thing to do is — nothing.

REMARKS Summertime:  
What's New? What's Up?  
Wabi Sabi? July 30, 2017

I feel somewhat as I did when the school year drew to a close, and I wanted to suggest activities to keep my students engaged in the business of learning, discovery and delight. As we prepare to suspend our usual Sunday morning gatherings for an entire month, my mind frets, "Will they even return in September?? Will they forget the old church on Pearl Street, the one with beautiful windows and a leaky roof? Will they turn to the lure of TV, box stores, pubs, the myriad distractions that the commercial world offers them? Will they pause to meditate, to wonder, to bask in the passing beauty of nature? I think these remarks are my anodyne for anxiety about these things, a way to inoculate my beloveds against surface enjoyments and point you toward the deep verities and joys that await you — given time and nothing to do. Besides reading, of course, which needs no

encouragement from me, but I have included a bookmark in your bulletin today that encourages us to read the books that have been banned, and to remember how fragile our freedom to know has been and is. So, back to what we may not ordinarily do but would be good to do this summer, or anytime.

I'm depending on the principles of Eastern wisdom to jostle us out of our accustomed Western way of looking at the world, ourselves and others, even the seemingly inconsequential things around the house, the garage and shed and yard. Our accustomed ways of looking at the world, as though it is just inert, inconsequential stuff, matter, raw resources for the engines of profit. Our old ways of looking at ourselves and others as workers within these engines of profit, worthwhile only so long as we are productive and efficient rather than seeing the world, ourselves and others as living beings, interdependent and co-

existing, subject to time, that is, to age and accident.

After experiencing an altered state of consciousness while in the Redwood Forest, I was afraid that if I returned to that place, I'd be disappointed. But it was alright. The second time, the forest — farther north this time, was still left to its own devices — trees in all stage of growth and return to dust, to earth, soft moss covering them, home to tiny forest creatures, all sound softly muted, the air dense with the presence of time.

So it was that years later, I turned to the study of the arranged forest environment of the arranged landscape of a Japanese Garden.

Years ago, before I came to you the first time, I immersed myself in the studied and arranged landscape of a Japanese Garden. The best, most authentic Japanese Garden outside of Japan itself lies just 50 miles east of here in Rockford. It's a blend of

ingenious technology and natural elements, all arranged to look as though its present form were its original form. But it is not. Every path was planned, berms built up, ponds dug low, every stone placed just so. The waterfalls are fed by streams powered by underground pumps, the fish introduced to the ponds, all the grass and ground-cover planted by gardeners, sand and pebbles raked into patterns that replicated the waves of the ocean or a curving shell. The tea house and guest house and the bridges were built by carpenters brought in from Japan who use the ancient techniques of handling wood with reverence. No path goes in a straight line for very long. They curve and serpentine through ten acres of land, but it feels like many more than that. The canopy trees were left intact, and the garden created around and in the midst of them; heavy branches that threatened to fall were propped up and preserved. Large stones were left in place and

decks built around them. The young trees may be tied down so that their branches leave openings through which we can view the scenes of lawns, flowers, and paths that lie beyond with each vignette framed by green leaves.

The interior of the tea house and guest house are marvels of simplicity, economy, minimalism, and serenity. The entire place is a meditation, purposely so. It is patterned after 14th century Japanese tea gardens. At that time, there were continual wars and skirmishes, and many men carried swords on their daily business. But when they were invited to a tea ceremony at a neighbor's home, they had to walk through the circuitous paths of the garden, past quiet ponds with languid fish, past myriad shades of green foliage, across the zig-zag bridge, calculated and constructed to free them of their pursuing demons of anger, fear and violence. By the time they arrive at the tea house, wash in the basin, and

greet their host, they are ready to leave their weapons on shelves, remove their shoes, and enter. The tea ceremony too is calculated to slow them down, to instill a sense of safety and calm peacefulness.

To be, bodily, in such an environment, even now, with traffic rushing by on Route 51 north and south, is to enter an alternate universe, a totally different and refreshing frame of mind and heart, as well as a needed corrective to our usual frame of mind and heart. And, a person could, if a person chose, recreate that alternate world, that frame of mind with reminders in our daily lives. My conviction is that this would be a good thing to do from time to time, especially when we feel stressed or worried or put-out, out-of-sorts, frustrated, impatient, angry or sad.

So, as we part for the summer month of August, I want to suggest a way of tending to our spiritual well-being by finding those reminders that can recreate around us the

healing, peaceful garden. The best things, the best reminders and objects of transforming power are, according to the Japanese philosophy of wabi-sabi, simple, probably hand-made, so not perfectly formed, and made for some common use, like a spoon for stirring oatmeal and soup, one that shows its age, stained and burnt and washed ten thousand times. But, here are the descriptions of what the Japanese call wabi-sabi.

“Wabi-Sabi is everything that today’s sleek, mass-produced, technology-saturated culture is not. It’s flea markets, not shopping malls; aged wood, not swank floor coverings; a single morning glory, not a dozen hot-house roses. Wabi-sabi understands the tender, raw beauty of a gray December landscape and the aching elegance of an abandoned building or shed. It celebrates cracks and crevices and rot and all the other marks that time and weather and use leave behind. To discover wabi-sabi is to see the singular

beauty in something that may at first look decrepit and ugly.

“Wabi-sabi reminds us that we are all transient beings on this planet — that our bodies, as well as the material world around us, are in the process of retuning to dust. Nature’s cycles of growth, decay, and erosion are embodied in frayed edges, rust, liver spots. Through wabi-sabi, we learn to embrace both the glory and the melancholy found in these marks of passing time. Bringing wabi-sabi into your life does not require money, training, or special skills. It takes a mind quiet enough to appreciate muted beauty, courage not to fear emptiness, willingness to accept things as they are — without ornamentation. It depends on the ability to slow down, to shift the balance from doing to being; to do nothing.”

So, I searched my house for some examples of things that had wabi-sabi, or suggest that they are impermanent, incomplete, and imperfect.

The imperfect was not difficult, since most of my possessions came from thrift stores, but the other qualities were not so easy to locate. So, I went to the antique shops in Elizabeth in search of others to show you this morning. Just see here what came to hand. An old wooden spoon, stained and burnt; a cast iron skillet, well used; a muddler for stirring oatmeal that is not very far gone on its journey; a clay pot, done in the wound spiral method, and left lumpy and unfinished; an old cream separator left to rust so beautifully; a piece of wood newly cut and sanded to show the odd-shaped knots and flaws in the wood. The last day-lily on a stem, bare not of all the buds and flowers that bloomed weeks ago.

Unless you have just moved into a state-of-the-art new-fangled house complete with furniture and utensils straight off the assembly line, you will have a few of these wabi-sabi things in your kitchen or

workshop. They have things to teach us.

First of all — Slow down and notice what is aroused within as we handle these things. Look with full attention and absorb the beauty of it; slo-o-ow down and let your mind become less pointed and efficient; leave some space for wandering wonderments — how time has been at work here, how use has changed it, how the both of us are in the same situation, like the man in the story a few weeks ago, who dangled over a cliff by a thread with a tiger above him and a tiger below, waiting.

How like it itself it has become, this wabi-sabi thing, every year more so than before, and how lovely it is, as itself, and how delicious is that strawberry growing out of the side of the cliff, but just for a moment in time. I wonder if we are, too, more ourselves every year and more lovely and interesting. How poignant, sad, but somehow comforting, too, that we are all on this ride together

up from dust and back to dust,  
and for this precious moment,  
we exist and regard one  
another, face to face, and offer  
what gratitude and praise we  
can to whatever energy in the  
universe allowed this to  
happen, or if this be your  
preference, just that it is. —  
hallelujah!

you can deal with whatever life  
brings you,  
and when death comes, you are  
ready.

Blessing: Tao Te Ching 16  
Empty your mind of all thoughts.  
Let your heart be at peace.  
Watch the turmoil of beings,  
but contemplate their return.

Each separate being in the  
universe  
returns to the common source.  
Returning to the source is serenity.

If you don't realize the source,  
you stumble in confusion and  
sorrow.  
When you realize where you  
come from,  
you naturally become tolerant,  
disinterested, amused,  
kindhearted as a grandmother,  
dignified as a king.  
Immersed in the wonder of the  
Tao,