

Holy Peace of Paradise by Julie Lombard

Haverhill has a special fondness for poets. Its own hometown hero, John Greenleaf Whittier, forever lives on in this land which honors this Quaker poet and abolitionist by naming schools and a healing center in his memory, and by land-marking his homestead. Whittier's most notable poem is titled "Snow-bound". Anyone who lived through this past winter here in Haverhill knows this story. It's a relatively long poem that tells the tale of his family and their many guests during a cold winter's blast. It seems like only yesterday we, too, were knee deep in our own winter's blast. He describes each character of this tale carefully, but none as sweetly as his youngest sister. Whittier describes her with a sense of loss that is almost tangible. Listen to his words as he recalls her in his poem...

As one who held herself a part
Of all she saw, and let her heart
Against the household bosom lean,
Upon the motley-braided mat
Our youngest and our dearest sat,
Lifting her large, sweet, asking eye,
Now bathed in the unfading green
And holy peace of Paradise.
Do those large eyes behold me still?
With me one little year ago.

Poets certainly have that gift, the one that can reach deep inside and touch us where our hearts might need mending. Do you ever think about the holy peace of paradise where our loved ones like Irma and Cindy are now?

As Whittier entered his final stage of life during the latter half of the nineteenth century, I can only image how he inspired another local budding poet coming of age. I am speaking of Robert Frost and, like Whittier, he is known for realistic depictions of rural life in New England. Did you know that both of these poets also lived on in our hymnal? In "Singing the Living Tradition", you can find Whittier's words in hymn #122 and Frost's words in hymn #64- these poetic words put to music so that we might not forget what they shared. "Oh, Give Us Pleasure in the Flower Today" is the title of the Frost's hymn, a fitting message for today. Maybe next year we can sing it together at this service.

The hymn is based on the poem Frost wrote in 1915 titled "A Prayer in Spring" which is printed on the backside of your order of service. The poem describes the pleasure he found in flowers. It is a deliverance from "Snow-bound" and a celebration to behold. Although Frost owned a farm in Derry, NH, he was known to be a far better poet and teacher than he was a farmer, yet in this poem he urges us to put aside our concerns of uncertain harvests. Do you have uncertain harvests in your lives?

Instead his request of us is to remain here, here in this precious moment, in the springing of the year. Frost finds beauty in an orchard's spring white blossoms by day and by night. Only weeks have passed since I last saw these blossoms at the orchard near my own home. I overlooked their beautiful blooms in the evening hours, may be you have, too.

Frost supports that we see their blossoms as an orchard of ghosts after evening falls- the reminder of loved one we have lost, all the while in daylight these same perfect trees host swarms of bees during their lively song and dance. Orchards are sacred places, like this church, divinely designed for all souls; for those of our ancestors, for those among us now, and for those of our budding future yet to bloom.

Frost invites us to rejoice, rejoice in this season of darting birds because only their joyful song can be heard singing above the happily humming of the bees. The birds, the bees, and the trees together are playing parts of a magnificent seasonal symphony. Have you heard it? And when the air stands still for a quick moment, yes, even the air plays an important part in this symphony. It demands a rest before the music continues boldly onward. Frost concludes his poem by saying, “for this is love and nothing else is love.” This is love and nothing else is love. He believes that this love is reserved for God. The Spirit of Life and Love has a wish for us and a need for us to fulfill that desire. We are partners of this common love, we are here to make this wish a reality.

Friends, this is what I think Frost, Whittier, and even Capek were asking us to do- to live courageously for our sacred ideals. It sounds so simple, but never easy. This is what our flower communion is for, a ritual to remind us that there is a plan that we can find in nature. During the Flower Communion you will hear another blessing by Capek which reminds us that it is in nature that we can “find implanted in the seed the future of the tree” and “in the hearts of humankind the longing to live in kinship and love”.

Before his life’s end, Capek realized that “those who are pressed from all sides and remain victorious in spirit are welcomed into the choir of heroes”. Let this be our symphony here. Let us be courageous as we now boldly sing as we march forward. I’m here to tell you that we are meant to lift our voices pressing on as a choir of heroes. This is the time for the blooming of our song, may we unearth the fullest beauty we have to share with the world.

Spiritual siblings, this takes courage, courage we have. It takes faith, faith we that we will endure and we will. I have faith in you because I know your hearts, its beat is pure. Together your hearts beat as one and their collective beat is stronger than you realize. It’s like the happy humming of the bees in the orchard that Frost writes of in “A Prayer in Spring”. You have a happy humming sound all your own. You may not have notice it over the clanging sounds that make up our busy lives, but I not only hear it, I have felt it. It is the pulse of your gathering.

Have you ever noticed how in a restaurant when the wait-staff arrives at a table to sing a guest “Happy Birthday” that they are often not singing alone? You’ve seen how folks from the other tables join in the chorus, the celebration becomes contagious. May our love sing out like the blossoms we long to see this time of year, and may its song be courageous and contagious. Let’s open our doors wide so our sweet sounds sweeps over Haverhill like a symphony made up of our gathered hearts until the rest of the city cannot help but join us in our celebration of life and love. Let our voices be a choir of heroes and may we invite the world to sing with us in a holy peace of paradise.

May it be so. Amen.