Living Like Weasels

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Matthew 5:13-20 ~ I Corinthians 2:1-11 ~ February 5, 2023

“A weasel is wild. Who knows what he thinks? He sleeps in his underground den, his tail draped over his nose. Outside, he stalks rabbits, mice, muskrats, and birds, killing more bodies than he can eat warm, and often dragging the carcasses home. Obedient to instinct, he bites his prey at the neck, either splitting the jugular vein at the throat or crunching the brain at the base of the skull, and he does not let go.”

Once, “a man shot an eagle out of the sky. He examined the eagle and found the dry skull of a weasel fixed by the jaws to his throat. The supposition is that the eagle had pounced on the weasel and the weasel swiveled and bit as instinct taught him, tooth to neck, and nearly won. I would like to have seen that eagle before he was shot: was the whole weasel still attached to his feathered throat, a fur pendant? Or did the eagle eat what he could reach, gutting the living weasel with his talons before his breast, bending his beak, cleaning the beautiful airborne bones?”

So begins Annie Dillard’s memorable short story called “Living Like Weasels.” (Teaching A Stone to Talk)

“I saw a weasel last week,” Ms. Dillard continues. “He was ten inches long, thin as a curve, a muscled ribbon, brown as fruitwood, soft-furred, alert. His face was fierce, small and pointed as a lizard’s; he would have made a good arrowhead.”

Ms. Dillard’s story is not about weasels only. She likes to watch animals, says she, because she, “is trying to learn, or remember, how to live. I might learn something of mindlessness, something of the purity of living in the physical senses and the dignity of living without bias or motive. The weasel lives in necessity and we live in choice, hating necessity and dying at the last ignobly in its talons. I would like to live as I should, as the weasel lives as he should.

“We could, you know. We can live any way we want. People take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience – even of silence – by choice. The thing is to stalk your calling in a certain skilled and supple way, to locate the most tender and live spot and plug into that pulse. This is yielding, not fighting. A weasel doesn’t “attack” anything; a weasel lives as he’s meant to, yielding at every moment to the perfect freedom of single necessity.”

Annie Dillard’s story, and her own search, speak profoundly of that thing which compels so many others: the search to live as we should. Not “should” in the sense of a morally-laden ought; rather, as we were created to live, born to live; the way we are meant to live – as God desires for us. We *do* search: to pattern our lives, prioritize our attention, time, energy. We seek and free ourselves from habits and relationships that bind or suffocate. We seek the right community, the right partner, the right job, the right calling.

Sometimes, we feel in sync; other times, not at all. Sometimes we settle for what we’ve got. Oft’times we *have* to settle for what is; we may not have a choice at this moment. Time and again, the question arises – the question as Parker Palmer asks, “what is the life that wants to live in you?” Are you living that life? This is what I would call a redemptive question; there is redemptive power even in the asking – hosting the question. Is *this* the life that wants to live in you?

You are the salt of the earth; you must retain your saltiness, express your saltiness. You are the light of the world. Don’t allow that inner brightness to be smothered by other’s expectations, or overwhelmed by your own busy-ness. Strip away. Return; reclaim the essence of who you are.

Jesus spoke these words to the crowds gathered in what we now call the sermon on the mount, the beatitudes. They are spoken not to one person in one particular context, but to each and to all in our several and varied contexts. Jesus’ call is universal. He does not say be salty sometimes. Let your light shine sometimes. Jesus says you – all of you, each of you – you are salt; you are light.

You already are who you need to be; you already have what you need; you already are the person who God calls you to be. There is not something outside yourself to learn or acquire. You need not seek perfection; you are the light of the world. Do not hide that light. This is what it means to live God’s love. Each one of us has a calling in life, that calling is to be ourselves.

What is the life that wants to live in you? What is the life that wants room to grow, to blossom, bear fruit, be salty? Our vocation is to become more and more ourselves.

Being of a different form than weasels, being beloved of God, living true to ourselves may open natural depths of compassion, creativity, awe, joy, love, and community.

The apostle Paul was a learned scholar and teacher. Yet, upon entering the church in Corinth, Paul says, ‘I didn’t come proclaiming the mystery of God using fancy words or high-fallutin’ wisdom. I came to you as I am. I came in weakness, fear, humility, and trembling. I came trusting in the Spirit, trusting that the Spirit would shine through me, trusting that the Spirit would be clear to you. I didn’t want to persuade you up “here” (head) with clever arguments; I wanted you to experience this within.

When we know that the life we are currently living is not it; our saltiness is meh; our light is dim, shrouded, a mere flicker. What then? It is when we begin to ask the question “how?” – How do I learn or remember? Recover or discover? – then – now, in asking, we are ready to take the next step. I believe that next step is some version of paying attention; paying attention to our lives, to ourselves in this world. Be gentle as you seek. Be gentle with yourself, with those around you.

We might go into the forest and watch, if not weasels, then other creatures. We might sit quietly in our own room, in prayerful contemplation, noticing our breath, noticing in our body each inhalation, exhalation. We might try journaling, or creative practice that opens us. We might remember something that gave us joy years ago and make space to do it again. Or we might think of that thing we’ve always wanted to try, but it was never the right time, and find the time now. Trust, as Paul did, that the Spirit is moving within you. These practices are what Celtic theologian John Philip Newell calls “listening for the heartbeat of God.”

Listening for the heartbeat of God, living like weasels… these are not steps we take and then are finished. We do not arrive. It is what we do, each day. What we do, becomes our life. And the living of our life, becomes who we are.

Annie Dillard concludes:

“I think it would be well, and proper, and obedient, and pure, to grasp your one necessity and not let it go, to dangle from it limp wherever it takes you. Then even death, where you’re going no matter how you live, cannot you part. Seize it and let it seize you up aloft even, till your eyes burn out and drop; let your musky flesh fall off in shreds, and let your very bones unhinge and scatter, loosened over fields and woods, lightly, thoughtless, from any height at all, from as high as eagles.” Amen.