

Diocese of Missouri Flower Festival
May 3, 2008

Key Presentation by
Bonnie Anderson, D.D., President
The House of Deputies

Let us pray.

O God, when work and responsibility wrap around our lives like a woolen cloak, and wonder is closed off from our lives, throw aside our protection. Guide us back to those places where our souls lie open to the cool breath of mystery from your spirit.

We ask this in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

(Prayer written by Sharlande Sledge)

Thank you for this kind invitation to be with you today. Thank you Bishop Smith and the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri; thank you to Christ Church Cathedral and to Dean Clingenpeel and thank you to the Missouri Botanical Garden.

It is important also that we give thanks to God for the life of Missouri Botanical Garden founder, Henry Shaw. Through the generosity and vision of this one person, whom many of us never knew, we gather together here today. We gather to give thanks for the beauty of creation. We gather to reflect upon the “wisdom and goodness of God as shown in the growth of flowers, fruits and other products of the vegetable kingdom.” The wisdom and goodness of God is present in all around us, everywhere and at all times. But being invited to focus upon God’s “wisdom and goodness as shown in the growth of flowers, fruits and other products of the vegetable kingdom” is of astonishing delight and not often what I am asked to talk about.

This opportunity to reflect on the meeting of Environmentalism and Ecclesiology brings me back where I started, years ago as an Adjunct Professor in University of Michigan’s School of Natural Resources. It was during that time that I was brought into closer relationship with Christ by the juxtaposition between my love for the Episcopal Church and my work in the academic area of behavior and environment; where I first truly understood that “everything is connected to everything else”. So this day illustrates for me the profound insight held by the first Episcopal priest I ever knew who was fond of pointing out, “No matter where you go, there you are”.

In addition to those words of wisdom, this priest showed me how to look for the existence of God and to be always watching for ways in which God is acting in my life. Like many gathered here, there is often a natural, earthy element present at times when we have felt closest to God. Whether it is a special place that we hold dear – near a body of water –creek, stream, lake, ocean, in the woods, or in our own garden, we are surprised

Bonnie Anderson, D.D., President
The House of Deputies

Diocese of Missouri Flower Festival

May 3, 2008

by the way we are “washed over” by the beauty, serenity, by the simple complexity, of this special place. Words like, “sacred landscape” and “holy site” come to mind.

In fact, the place does not have to be a place at all, but a realization of beauty like the intricate design and color inside the petals of a flower, each part distinctly beautiful, with a contribution to make to the whole. In both instances, whether this holy site is overwhelmingly large or infinitesimally small, long ago the mystical Celts had a name for places that give us an opening into the magnificence and wonder of the Presence of God. They called them “Thin Places”. (*Sharlande Sledge in an unpublished document*)

Marcus Borg, in his book *The Heart of Christianity*, describes a thin place as “anywhere our hearts are opened”. They are places where the boundary between the two levels becomes very soft, porous, permeable. Thin places are places where the veil momentarily lifts and we behold (the “ahaah of The Divine”)...“all around us and in us”.

The important thing to acknowledge is that the “thin place” is a connection between what people have perceived as Holy and our on-going reality or understanding of God’s creation. The boundary between our spiritual self and our worldly self becomes deeply connected, we have gone someplace new into the unknown and, like those in our reading this morning from Deuteronomy, we know that this new land belongs to God and God’s eyes are on the land and, because we belong to God, we know we have a part in it.

It strikes me that God gives us these thin places so that we can have tangible evidence not only of a place we call “heaven” but of the world as it should be. We get these glimpses of perfect beauty and a full sense of well-being and peace to remind us what it could be like here on earth, a reconciled world. We get these glimpses to remind us what *WE* could be like. And in doing that, God is whetting our appetite to be all that God created us to be.

But there is a hitch. God does not leave us alone to sit and gaze upon the earth’s beauty from a high mountain top. We may think that God intends to paralyze us with unexpected beauty; instead God is shaking us up, stirring us up, and zapping us with truth and hope and beauty so that we don’t lose sight of what God made us to be. So that we don’t lose sight that God has created us to live in harmony with creation, the birds of the sky, the fish of the sea, the animals and other living things, including each other.

We get these glimpses into what it could be like so we don’t lose sight that God has commanded us to love each other- as we promise at our baptism and as we continue to promise each time we renew our baptism. Not to lose sight that we promise God in the context of our Christian Community, in the environment of god’s creation, to love our neighbors as ourselves. That’s the hitch. We are not to be paralyzed by the beauty of creation, but we are to be called more deeply and more profoundly into God’s service by

Diocese of Missouri Flower Festival
May 3, 2008

it.

In her sermon at the Episcopal Divinity School's St. John's Chapel last year, Professor Fredrica Harris Thompsett said,

The Bible teaches that grace rises anew from the ground, from deep wells, from flowing springs, and especially from cultures enmeshed in poverty, from those at the margins who are forced to wait at wellsprings. Grace arises from a God who troubles the waters so that they and we will not remain still, stuck and stagnant.

God brings us beauty, flowers, trees, vegetables, fruits, rain, thunder and lightning, new life in spring, snow, and leaves that put on a show so spectacular that it can take our breath away. God brings us these things to remind us of our job.

Our job to "love the Lord our God and to serve God with all our heart and all our soul". It is our job to value and tend it all; the most enormous and the smallest, the mustard seed. It is our job to hold the Kingdom of God in our mind's eye so that we can recall it and draw strength from it when we are wearied by the changes and the chances of this life. And it is our job to keep the promise we make to God and to each other – to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We would not stand for it to have our loved ones living in poverty. We would not stand for it to have ourselves living in poverty. We cannot stand for it when our brothers and sisters across the globe and in our own country live in poverty. God has troubled the waters so that we will not be stagnant.

We cannot tolerate it when the young Episcopalian boy on the Crow Creek reservation in our own Diocese of South Dakota, where I visited last week, stuffed mashed potatoes and corn into his pocket during his school provided lunch so that his grandmother and young brother would have something to eat that night.

We cannot tolerate it when our sisters and brothers in the Anglican Church in the Sudan are terrorized by atrocities too horrible and frightening for us to even mention.

We cannot sit idly by while God's beloved earth spins toward irreversible climate change, or when there are 16,000 species of plants and animals on the edge of extinction.

But God provides us with thin places so we can be renewed; God surrounds us with animals and plants and all living creatures. God surrounds us with the beauty of this fragile earth, not so we will appreciate it and then go on our merry way, but so that we will be reminded of our baptismal promise to love and serve God. This is where the church, where we as God's people, intersect with the natural order.

Diocese of Missouri Flower Festival
May 3, 2008

Hear a poem by Mary Oliver:

I would like to write a poem about the world that has in it
nothing fancy.

But it seems impossible.

Whatever the subject, the morning sun
glimmers it.

The tulip feels the heat and flaps its petals open
and becomes a star.

The ants bore into the peony bud and there is the dark
pinprick well of sweetness.

As for the stones on the beach, forget it.

Each one could be set in gold.

So I tried with my eyes shut, but of course the birds
were singing.

And the aspen trees were shaking the sweetest music
out of their leaves.

And that was followed by, guess what, a momentous and
beautiful silence

as comes to all of us, in little earfuls, if we're not too
hurried to hear it.

As for spiders, how the dew hangs in their webs
even if they say nothing, or seem to say nothing.

So fancy is the world, who knows, maybe they sing.

So fancy is the world, who knows, maybe the stars sing too,
and the ants, and the peonies, and the warm stones,
so happy to be where they are, on the beach, instead of being
locked up in gold.

My friends, on this very special festival day of celebration, God brings us beauty to enjoy
and to remind us of our job and of the promises we have made.

Behold the beauty. Let's allow ourselves to be lost in it, to "waller in it" for a short time.
Behold the beauty then, with renewed strength, let us go out and do the work that God
has given us to do.

Amen.