

Changed by Giving

A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon

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This November, during our month of abundance, I challenged us all to recognize our blessings and share of them – seeking to give something away each day.

I preached that the result would be not only increased warm-and-fuzzies, but the kind of deep connection that is our highest calling as a religious community and the kind of culture-change that Lauren Wright described in this morning's reading.

But as my attempts at generosity met with several looks of “are you crazy?” and a few suspicious looks of “alright, what's the catch?” And as I struggled to push myself beyond the easy armchair philanthropy of online giving. I realized the power of the culture we're up against – the culture that tells us to keep our heads down and guard what is ours.

Kevin Brockmeier is an author in the school of American magical realism who has written a story that is more real than magical, in illustrating the culture of which I speak.

I'd like to share a few excerpts from that story.

“Once there was a city where people did not look one another in the eye. It had been that way for as long as anyone could remember.

[...]

Every child was taught that the eye was where the spark of life was located. That spark was always hungry, they learned, and it fed on the things it saw. It stood to reason, then, that to look into someone else's eye was to risk having your spark consumed, if not devoured in a single swallow, then eaten away a piece at a time. The common understanding among the inhabitants of the city was that people were born with only a small amount of life in their eyes and that when it emptied out it could not be replenished. This one thing they were certain of above all others: just as staring into the sun would eventually steal their sight from them, so too, staring into another pair of eyes would eventually steal their souls.

[... Brockmeier continues, describing all the things the people do to avoid catching one another's eyes. Then he ends like this:...]

The city where no one looked anyone else in the eye produced its fair share of human happiness, but it was a cautious sort of happiness, never spilling too far past its own boundaries. [...] They kept their passions hidden, even from themselves, for

they had grown accustomed to their lives and did not wish to see them overturned.

And yet, though most of them were at peace with the custom of turning their gazes away from one another, every so often someone would realize that he had become tired of treasuring up the sparks in his eyes and fall silent for a day or two.

It happened not only to teenagers groping toward their futures, but to grown men and women who had already come into the fullness of life, and occasionally even to those nearing the end.

They had never stood on a stage under the surveillance of a crowd. They should not have known what it felt like to spend long minutes staring longingly into someone's eyes. Yet something inside them missed those things terribly.

When it got to be too much for them, they would lift their heads- uncertainly at first, and then with a poise that surprised them - and begin looking for a pair of eyes that was willing to meet their own, no matter the consequence, for however long it took until they expended the last of their souls."¹

The spark of life.
The light of the world.
The flame of spirit.

There are a hundred different ways to say it - that something burns within us, fuels our being and becoming, keeps us impassioned, inspired, alive. It is soul, divine spark, gift from God.

Whatever we may call it, we know it is there, that creative force which moves us.

It is the longing for connection, the hunger for beauty, the drive to love.

It is so powerful and precious that it is our first instinct to protect it at all costs, to hoard it all away.

And yet - it is the heart and soul and purpose of a church community to move us beyond our fear of depletion and to help us unleash that spark of life upon the world.

To put that creative and loving force within us to work.

To let it shine.

¹ Brockmeier, Kevin. "A Fable Containing a Reflection the Size of a Match Head in its Pupil." *The View from the Seventh Layer*. Random House, 2009.

We join in community to hold one another accountable to the incredible spark within; because it is all too tempting to hide our lights under a thousand bushel baskets of our own making.

Bushels of fear, or perfectionism, or complacency - bushels that make it easy to believe at heart, somewhere deep inside, that our soul-supply is scarce, in danger of depletion.

We find ourselves thinking, we barely have enough of our own spark, and whatever is left, our children or our job need it all. And anyhow, we have grown accustomed to our lives and do not wish to see them changed.

Perhaps we begin to fear those beyond our inner circle, afraid that open, vulnerable contact beyond the walls of our cautious and contained worlds will steal away our light.

We fail to make ourselves available to someone else in a genuine way, afraid that our stores of love will be diminished by the hungry gaze of another- an other who inevitably wants something from us – something like connection, beauty, or love – something that will change us.

Or maybe we begin to hide our passions, those gifts through which the creative force moves in us. We hide them because they are too precious to be known by others. We hide them because we fear we could never live up to them fully.

But, in the end, it is by hiding them that we ensure they will never reach fulfillment. Because our bushels are not as selective as we might like. Too often hiding our light from others hides it from ourselves as well.

And there is the crux of the matter. It is in our very attempt to protect our own flame of spirit that we deprive it of what it most needs to burn bright.

It longs for connection, and we guard it with a wall. It needs love, and we guard it with fear. It needs beauty, and we close our eyes and ears tight shut to keep it safe.

We don't want it to be stolen, but its very desire is to be given away, and, through being given, to return again, ten-fold.

Because the truth is, a spark does not burn out from contact with another spark. Rather it grows and spreads. It is by giving away some of our spark to another that we grow the fire for us all.

It is not easy, sharing like that. The walls we have built around ourselves are strong, and they have served a real purpose in bringing us whole and well to this time and place.

But perhaps if we can recognize the bushels we use to protect us, we can transform them from lampshades back into baskets.

Perhaps, together, we can learn to uncover our light.

Some of our bushels are assumptions we have about the world around us. Some of them are written into our culture and hard to see with the naked eye. Lenses of privilege, layers of worry or fear.

And some of them are very nice things in and of themselves. Etiquette... can be a thick shield to hide behind. Friendliness... can be an excuse to keep things light, surface level.

Indeed, it is by interrogating our most natural habits that we find our strongest defenses.

And even then, identifying our bushels is only first step. The next is to transform them.

This transformation, like most, has to do with turning our attention to the Universe or God or to humanity writ large. We move from self to other-focus.

It is then that we recognize that they were never *our* sparks to protect in the first place. They were a gift, by grace, from the one creative source we all share.

The job of light is to shine, paraphrasing Matthew's Gospel, so that all may rest in its glow and give glory to its source.

In other words, your life spark is not *for you*. It is for the flourishing of life in all its glory. Give it up. Let it shine.

Are you protecting a passion? Putting off something you care about doing because you're not good enough or not ready yet? It is not yours to protect. It belongs to the creative spirit pulsing within you. Let it shine.

Are you guarding your spirit? Hiding it from another because you're afraid they won't respect or love you if they see your imperfections? Your wall is shielding you from the very love and respect you desire. It is there to be had. You are meant to be shared. Let it shine.

Our passions, our callings, our lives don't have to be the strongest light or the purest or the brightest. They just have to be uncovered.

During this month of abundance we have sought to fan our flame of spirit into a broader culture of generosity. I hope we have found out the truth - that the more we

give, the more we are transformed.

I imagine we have learned, as well, that there is something in us that does not wish to change and that will guard our spark at all costs.

It will take ongoing hard work to let down that guard. It will involve recognizing and overturning every bushel basket that has kept us safe and contained for a lifetime.

But what we will find on the other side of those walls is not diminishment, but growth. More sparks. Perhaps a great bonfire.

What we will find, as a community, is a culture of abundance and love that must burst forth from this place – that we will carry with us everywhere we go.

What is shielding your light?

Is it these physical walls? Is it an unquestioned culture within?

Is it the weight of history or tradition? Is it the burden of the future?

Is it scarcity? Is it privilege?

Think about it.

Because we have a powerful spark here, and it should be spread.

Imagine how it could catch fire, roaring into a beacon for mid-Missouri.

Imagine the creativity waiting to pour forth from each of you – singers, writers, inventors, thinkers.

Imagine the love we could spread, with nothing to stop the outflow of compassion already abundant in this place.

Imagine all we could do, with our passions blazing – nothing in our way.

The light of the world is within us. It is ready to be uncovered.

Look one another in the eye.

Reconnect. Let it shine.