

YEARNINGS

Embracing the Sacred Messiness of Life

Crafting Unfinished Stories

(Yearning to Create)

A prompting offered by the Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ
Dayton, Ohio

Psalm 19:1-4a

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

John 2:13-22

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

In the temple [Jesus] found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle.

John 2:14-15

I love to create. I was the kind of kid who led other kids in the neighborhood to create things: forts, tree houses, snowmen, lemonade stands. I was the kind of kid who took great joy in creating a clean and organized garage. As a teenager I created a youth choir in my church and 3 children's choirs. I loved being a part of the creating and executing of dramas and musicals and choirs and ensembles in junior high and high school. I loved learning how to play the piano, even though practicing was hard work, and I never quite applied myself like I should have. I loved being a music major in college and all the creating that entailed. I was even a voice major in college, but I can't sing worth a lick, but that sure didn't stop me from trying.

At the end of college I realized after years of creating music that I just didn't want to be a music director anymore. I realized I wasn't much of a performer and I didn't have as good an ear for pitch as I wanted, or needed, to have. So after college I went from creating music to creating youth ministries in churches. I gave my heart to it. But after two tenures as a youth minister and having visions of doing junior high lock-ins till Jesus comes, I decided to go to seminary to become a minister of Christian Education. In Baptist life, that meant growing and nurturing Sunday Schools.

In the church I served while I was in seminary, I had the privilege of leading the church (kicking and screaming I might add!) as it went from one Sunday School and one worship service, to two Sunday Schools and two worship services, and then to three Sunday Schools, all in two years. All of this creative activity led me to an interest in the art of growing and starting churches.

By the time I was done with seminary, I was done with being a fundamentalist Christian. I was sick and tired of hearing about the inerrancy and infallibility of scripture; about the literal interpretation of the Bible and all the absurdity and idolatry that encompasses. I was sick and tired of watching good and decent Christian people being attacked and fired because they would not tow the fundamentalist party line. I was sick and tired of having to listen to people insist the King James Version of the Bible was the only true translation, as if the Apostle Paul carried that very Bible on his missionary journeys, leather bound and red letter edition. I was sick and tired of women not being permitted to serve as ordained ministers. I was sick and tired of fighting battles over whether boys and girls could swim together at summer camp. And on and on it went. Did I say I was sick and tired? Anyway, I knew that if I were going to remain a Baptist minister, I would have to start a new church.

Well, it wasn't long till I found myself presented with a call and an opportunity to create a new Baptist church from scratch right here in Dayton, Ohio. It was great opportunity to create a community of faith that was open to learning and education instead of stymied by indoctrination and group think. It was a great chance to create a church with a little more openness and acceptance of difference and human brokenness. It was a chance to create worship with new styles and new techniques and new media. But as many of you know, that creative effort, while successful, was short lived. As a "gay" minister, my creative energy and impulses were squashed and discarded like a unwanted and defective lump of clay. But true to my deep yearning to create, I couldn't help but take that discarded lump of clay, and with the support and encouragement of a small group of friends and fellow pilgrims, put that lump of clay back on the potter's wheel and began to create a new vessel. Cross Creek Community Church is that beautiful, stunning vessel.

Reading Rabbi Irwin Kula's book, *YEARNINGS; EMBRACING THE SACRED MESSINESS OF LIFE*, I realize that so much of my life and my identity is about creating. Whether that is partnering, parenting or pastoring, the opportunities and potential to create are ever before me. Being in a life partnership with Dan Carl is a continual process of trying to create a shared life and home together. Being a parent presents constant opportunities to create a world of love and forgiveness and grace and possibility and joy. And being a pastor is never static! It is a demanding, dynamic effort of creating, whether that is in the form of a sermon or planning worship, or developing programs like our Friday Night Lenten Meal and Movie Series or organizing people for the work of justice. The desire—yes the yearning—to create has been and remains so much a part of my life. So much so that I don't know what life would be like without its creative energy and drive.

But I do know this: creativity is not all candy and roses. It is, as they say, "not for sissies!" At best, it is both a blessing and a curse. It is at the same time exhilarating and exhausting; beautiful and messy. To create is to make yourself vulnerable to risk, to rejection and to disappointment. And as Rabbi Kula notes: "creativity is so full of anxieties and failures, boredom and drudgery," but "when we resist these experiences because they are painful or frightening, we deny ourselves a rich aspect of life." Yearning to create is an essential part of what it means to be human.

Not only do I like to create, but I take great joy and inspiration from other people who give themselves over to their own creative yearnings. I find that people who are willing to risk their creative impulses are the most alive and the most interesting people I know. I love watching (and hearing!) our Card Ministry folks, led by Patty Thompson, make the beautiful cards that Vivian Ekberg sends out like a mad hatter to those in our community who are sick or struggling, or who we haven't seen for a while, or who deserve a big "thank you" for some good thing they have done in our midst. When our card "creators" get together after church on the first

Sunday of the month, I love listening to them from across the hall. As they are busy creating cards there is a lot of laughter, and storytelling, and of course eating, and just enjoying each other's company. Sometimes I even hear them fussing with and discussing my sermon, which is a high form of compliment!

I love seeing the creative work of people like Juli Burnell, who create beautiful landscapes and award winning gardens. I marvel at the creative work of people like Donna Moore who tends her vegetable garden with care and sweat. I am so thankful for our Cross Creek Choir and the beautiful music they create and the community that is created in the process of making such wonderful music together. I get weepy with joy over people like Colonel Dan Tepfer whose creative commitment and tenacity to justice and equality took him all the way to Washington DC this past Friday to speak on the lawn of the U.S. Capitol to seek the repeal of our military's "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy.

I feel so blessed to know creative people like Pat McClelland whose artistic abilities abound. Each week we find our worship experience enhanced by his creation of our Cross, Altar Table and Pulpit. (Last night, Pat was in the Saturday service and I told him I think we need him to create a baptismal font. Mark Thompson and I were at a church in Columbus yesterday and I noticed they had this beautiful font. Don't you think a baptismal font would be nice to complete our McClelland collection!?)

I also love to watch our sons create: 6-year old Gideon drawing pictures and building Lego creations; 17-month old Aydan creating little happy dances throughout the day. Aydan's latest dance craze is to the beat of that annoying McDonald's fillet of fish sandwich commercial. Kenny Roaden also seems to know that tune well...

Lent is a season for strong emotions. It is often thought of as a season of prayer, of reflection, of solitude and listening. But if we are not careful though, we might think that means calmness and serenity. However, underneath our efforts at prayer and listening for God there stirs a mixture of strong emotions – sadness, grief, regret, pain, guilt and even anger. And often these strong emotions are the very inspiration and motivation for creativity...of creating new ways of being and doing.

For most Christians, anger is a bad thing, the very opposite of the virtues of love, patience, gentleness, and forgiveness. We have great difficulty with the idea of God as an angry God; we breathe a sigh of relief that we have left behind and moved beyond the God of the Old Testament—that jealous, angry God who punished the second, third, and even fourth generation of those who sinned. And if we have difficulty with the idea of an angry God, it is even more ludicrous for us to think of Jesus as someone who lost his temper, made a whip, and was decidedly wrathful on a number of occasions.

Often artists' renderings of Jesus are usually saintly, benign, and bucolic: Jesus praying in the garden, hands clasped in earnest prayer, eyes rolled earnestly toward heaven; Jesus holding the little lambs and leading the adoring sheep; Jesus presiding graciously at his Last Supper, with the beloved disciple resting at his shoulder. Most depictions of Jesus are intentionally devoid of powerful or negative emotion. We do want an all-loving, all-compassionate, gentle Savior, just as we want our world and our lives to be safe from suffering, sorrow, tragedy, and rage.

We can project our own desire for perfection upon the image of Jesus; if we are not loving enough, we can say, "He is." If we fail another, or someone fails us, we can still say, "There's not a friend like Jesus." We may blow it, lose our cool, our tempers, our composure, but he never does. He is perfection, or so we like to think; in him are the mind and heart and desires of a loving, compassionate God.

But here it is folks. Here is a Gospel story, recorded in all four Gospels, of an irritated, angry man with a short fuse. No meek and mild Jesus here but a man of action, even rage. This man throws

over the tables in the temple and drives out the money changers. It seems our Jesus is capable of losing his temper and letting it rip!

Frankly, I feel a great sense of relief when I hear this story. For here Jesus is a human being, reacting as anyone might react in a situation where justice and love is the demand and requires creativity and activity rather than passivity and apathy and playing it safe. He actually cared enough to get angry. I think Jesus' anger gives us a hint about how passionate and driven he was to create...to create something new and different...to create something more loving and just...to create something more earthy and real...to create something where God is known and experienced in profound and powerful ways.

I think Jesus was a passionate creator. He was a co-creator with God and called forth then – and still calls forth now – that co-creating spirit in those who would follow in his way. In our passage from John's Gospel, we have the story of the cleansing of the Temple. It is a familiar story. Jesus goes to Jerusalem for Passover, the greatest of all Jewish festivals. The gospel writers Mark, Matthew and Luke, place this story in the last week of Jesus' life – in Holy Week – but John places it at the beginning of his ministry. But wherever the story is placed, I think this story says something about Jesus' "zeal" for God and his drive to create a world more God-like. But maybe John had the sense that Jesus' anger, like his baptism, was also a starting place for his creative ministry. And here, Jesus' anger, expressed by pushing out the moneychangers, signifies the sweeping away of obstacles to wholeness, to justice, to a deeper love, to God. And here, Jesus' anger expresses the depth of Jesus' passion to create a more loving and just world, a world where the means of life are offered freely to all, a world where fear gives way to love, a world that experiences and lives the reality of the Kingdom of God – NOW! On earth!

Every day gives rise to new opportunities to create. The Psalmist indicates that everyday God is Still Speaking and God is Still Creating:

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims God's handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

Every day! Every day God is Still Speaking and God is Still Creating. And in a world wallowing in despair, ablaze with violence, and divided by narrow self-interest, and filled with non-stop noise and clutter and spam, this Still Speaking, Still Creating God offers us a way out of our hopeless. Offers us a way out of our splintered, empty ways. The way out is through God's daily creativity that begins everyday at dawn with a beauty that can move us and a power that can shake us. This silent creation is open to all without regard to nation, creed, race, sexual orientation or religion. And if we will stop, pay attention, and recognize the ongoing impulses of God's creative power in this wordless speech, we can be healed, and we can be whole and we can be one and we can be energized to join God in co-creating new worlds and new days into being. Rabbi Kula reminds us that "Genesis happens every morning when we open our eyes to the light that marks what is always the first day" and that the world "was left unfinished so that humans could have a part of Creation."

But I have to admit. As much as I like to create, I still carry more than my share of ambivalence about my place...about our church's place...in being co-creators with each other and with God. I've decided that for me, my yearning to create is like Sheherezade. You may remember her. She was one of the wives of a mad sultan who had the nasty habit of chopping off the heads of his wives. But every night Sheherezade would tell him a great unfinished story. He kept thinking to kill her like the rest, but he couldn't because he loved her stories. And the stories led him finally out of his madness to love her.

And there are days I think I could leave these yearnings to be a co-creator with God, chop off its head and go do something I can actually manage. But I must tell you: these yearnings to create keep crafting these great unfinished stories. And God's story isn't finished, yet. The biblical story

isn't finished. My story, our church's story isn't finished yet. God...you...me...we are all writing new chapters in and through our lives; the Good News of the ages and of Jesus is still unfolding; and we are co-creators with God in the grace stories of our lives— which all together add up to the story of God's love at work in the world.

Isn't it great to be a part of Cross Creek Community Church? Isn't it great to be part of the United Church of Christ? Isn't it great living and creating on the edge? Isn't it great to see what God is doing now in opening up new doors of welcome and spiritual understanding in these days? What will God do next? What new, creative, radical idea about God will bring a sense of clarity and vitality and new life to our Lenten days? And when we get through arguing over the "homosexuals" and the "transgender folks" what new people group will knock on our doors needing acceptance, love and a refuge from oppression and brokenness? Where will all this creativity end? I don't know. I really have no idea, but I can't wait to find out! And I'm glad we're on this journey together, co-creating with God. Crafting these beautiful, stunning, unfinished stories all along the way!