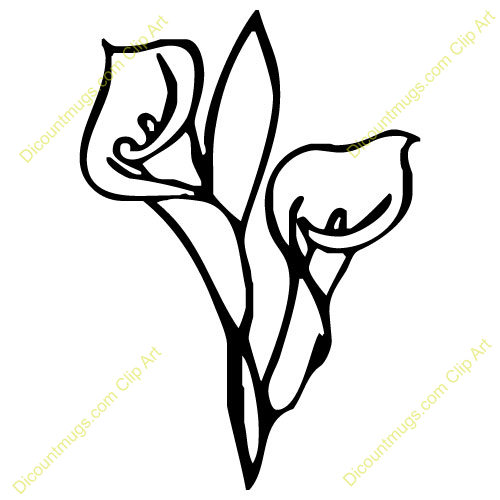
**First Presbyterian Church of Pittsford**

**November 8, 2015**

**Widow’s Wisdom**

**Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17**

**1 Kings 17:8-16**

**Psalm 146**

**Mark 12:38-44**

1. A widower shared this wisdom with me.
   1. Living is hidden within dying.
   2. In the visible world of nature, a great truth is concealed in plain sight: diminishment and beauty, darkness and light, death and life are not opposites.
      1. They are held together in the paradox of the “hidden wholeness.”
   3. In a paradox, opposites do not negate each other; they cohere in mysterious unity at the heart of reality.
      1. Deeper still, they need each other for health, as our bodies need to breathe in as well as breathe out.
   4. F Scott Fitzgerald said, “Life starts all over again when it gets crisp in the fall.”
      1. But in a culture that prefers the ease of either-or thinking to the complexities of paradox, we have a hard time holding opposites together.
      2. We want light without darkness, the glories of spring and summer without the demands of autumn and winter, and the Faustian bargains we make fail to sustain our lives.
   5. Widows and widowers know this wisdom.
      1. And their wisdom is hidden in plain sight because the very mention of widowhood makes us uncomfortable.
         1. Our associations with being widowed are morbid, creepy and negative.
            1. Think of the black widow spider or the literary image of the crone.
         2. This strong visceral reaction we have to widowhood is the very reason that widows are archetypal.
            1. Widows are metaphorical for anybody who is without power – the marginalized or oppressed.
2. Our discomfort with discussing widowhood stems from our fears, our unwillingness to be inconvenienced or made to feel awkward and ultimately our guilt.
   1. What do we fear?
      1. The obvious answer to that is we fear death – both ours and the deaths of those we love.
         1. We have just come through Halloween where we do everything we can to caricature death and diminish the gruesome grip of fear it has over us.
            1. We dress up as the grim reaper.
            2. We create adorable costumes for children so we can focus on innocence and hope.
            3. We feel as if we have stared death in the face and laughed at it.
         2. Ha!
         3. But as I listen to widows and widowers, they tell me that it is not so much that they fear death.
            1. Many say that death would be a welcome release.
      2. What they fear is loneliness.
         1. To whom do you talk at the end of the day?
         2. Who helps you fasten the top button, tie the bowtie, pull up the zipper or fasten the necklace and bracelet?
         3. How can you get your life-giving daily does of hugs?
         4. It seems as if the party invitations dry up because who likes a third wheel?
         5. How do people talk about the dearly departed?
      3. Yes, we fear loneliness, and that loneliness leads to despair or indifference, and perhaps even more dire, guilt.[[1]](#footnote-2)
         1. We feel guilty that we are still alive.
         2. We feel guilty that our immediate loved ones are still alive.
            1. And our guilt makes being around widows and widowers inconvenient, uncomfortable, not our first choice on a Friday night.
3. Widows are mentioned 89 times in the Bible.
   1. The term widow has a more specific meaning in the biblical texts than the English word conveys.
      1. Almana in Hebrew and Chera in Greek are what we know as widows.
      2. The woman designated by these terms was not merely someone whose husband had died.
         1. The widow lived outside of the normal social structure in which every female lived under the authority of some male.
         2. The widow was responsible to and for herself.
      3. The structure of ancient society was kinship based and patriarchal.
         1. Marriage within this society represented a contract made between two families rather than between two individuals.
         2. When a woman married, she passed from the authority of her father’s household to the authority of her husband’s household.
         3. When her husband died, her status was determined in relation to the surviving members of his household.
      4. Some even perceived widowhood as a disgrace.
         1. Death before old age was mistakenly viewed as a judgment upon sin, and the reproach extended to the surviving spouse.
      5. The widow’s independence from male authority gave her a precarious social position.
         1. In more than half its occurrences, the word widow is linked with orphan and/or alien.
         2. Existing outside the normal social structure, these three groups were susceptible to oppression, injustice and exploitation.
         3. We see this in our texts about Ruth, Naomi, and the widow Elijah visits.
   2. What does Jesus say about widows?
      1. Jesus was sensitive to the widow’s marginal existence.
      2. From the stories Jesus told about widows like today’s tale of the widow’s mite, we know that this threatened existence persisted into the time when Jesus was alive.
         1. He restored life to the only son of the widow of Nain.
         2. He declared that the widow’s mite in today’s reading exceeded in value the large gifts of the scribes to the Temple treasury, suggesting that some of their wealth was obtained by eating up the property of widows.
   3. When we avoid widows, widowers, orphans, aliens and all they represent, we severely limit ourselves to what we know, to what makes us feel comfortable.
      1. Have you ever noticed what Jesus did around those who only wanted to be comfortable?
         1. Jesus comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable.
         2. Jesus taught early Christians that they were to single out widows as recipients of social welfare, and establish an organized means of caring for this group of women.
         3. Early Christians did not focus just on charity but on structural and systemic change leading to greater opportunity for self-realization by any oppressed or marginalized group.
4. Dr. Lisa Randall is a physics professor at Harvard and the author of numerous books including *Dark Matter and the Dinosaurs: The Astounding Interconnectedness of the Universe.*
   1. Dr. Randall sees dark matter as the key to the universe – and surprisingly, the key to human empathy as Jesus taught his disciples and us.
   2. She likens dark matter – matter present throughout the universe that is invisible to us because it doesn’t emit or absorb light – to other entities that remain unnoticed by us, but influence the workings of the world.
   3. Who of us pays attention to the bacterial cells in our bodies which outnumber human cells by a factor of ten?
   4. Or who of us keeps up with the myriad Internet communities and subcultures that thrive outside our awareness?
      1. For example, if you want to know anything about Pokemon or Minecraft, you can ask either one of our children.
   5. Randall describes how unnoticed dark matter and unnoticed realities around us can color our perceptions.
      1. We cannot understand what we cannot experience or see, including the often hidden cultural forces that animate other people and their communities.
      2. These blind-spots challenge scientists but usually in ways that are more obvious and readily acknowledged.
         1. The world looks entirely different at the scale of the atom – or the Higgs Boson (the so-called God-particle) – than it does when viewed from a chair or from open space.
         2. This is why the rules of quantum mechanics can appear unintuitive or illogical.
            1. Their unfamiliarity makes them difficult to comprehend.
      3. Most of us mistake our own perspective, shaped by our subjective and limited perception, for the absolute reality of the external world.
   6. Questioning this assumption is what advanced research on dark matter.[[2]](#footnote-3)
      1. It is also the ONLY thing that has ever advanced human empathy.
         1. It may be hard to understand why somebody behaves differently from us but we have to consider that other person’s perspective.
            1. It may be uncomfortable for us to do so, but empathy is what Jesus models, encourages, calls and equips us to actively share.
         2. Empathy may be difficult and uncomfortable.
            1. It is also crucial to the progress of both science and society.

Empathy demands our making a deliberate and consistent effort to step out of our familiar frames of reference.

Only then can we synthesize different perspectives, observations and experiences.

This synthesis is the heart of creativity.

Empathy-based creativity is essential to solving the increasingly complex problems besetting our world.

* + - 1. Our moral, spiritual and developmental imperative is to grow beyond our discomfort.
         1. We know from nature around us: if we are not growing, we are dying.
      2. Living is hidden within dying.

1. In August, the Mitchells made our annual pilgrimage to my folks’ home and enjoyed the glorious summer weather.
   1. Only one afternoon of our week had lousy weather and so we took advantage of the rain for the rare treat of watching a movie in a movie theater.
      1. We saw Disney’s *Inside Out*.
      2. It’s a lovely film, about the emotions that we all carry inside us. Joy, sadness, anger, fear, disgust.
      3. Each one is personified: “joy” is a luminous being, sadness a “blue” little girl, anger a stocky man who shoots flames of wrath from his head, and so on.
      4. The emotions want the little girl, Riley, who is the main character to be happy.
      5. At one point in the film they even banish “sadness,” so that Riley can have a chance to be Happy.
      6. But then they come to see that it is not possible to be whole if we banish any part of us.
      7. Each emotion has a role in the redemption story.
      8. Eventually, they come to embrace that Riley can only be made whole by embracing the role for each of them.
   2. Somewhere in the middle of watching the movie, I began thinking about something much more meaningful.
      1. I want to be beyond happy.
      2. What we each desire is to be whole.
   3. When we walk into bookstores, we find — often right next to the religion section, the spirituality section, and, sadly, the business section — there is the unavoidable self-help section.
      1. Self-help is big business.
      2. Amazon lists some 1635 book titles under “happiness self-help.”
      3. Billions of dollars are spent on the promise of happiness.
         1. Books, podcasts, workshops, seminars, and retreats promise many things.
         2. They tap into many different religious traditions, spiritual teachings, and some with no discernable tradition.
         3. At their core, they have one thing in common: there is a secret to happiness.
         4. Follow this teaching and you’ll find happiness.
   4. The promise of secret, esoteric knowledge is ancient.
      1. The Greeks, Persians, and Indians all had it.
      2. Texts attributed to both Jesus and Muhammad depict them as rising to a mountaintop with the most worthy disciples and whispering the secret into their ears.
         1. Yes, spiritual secrets are taken very seriously.
         2. The very act of sharing these secrets can help shape a sense of community, of intimacy, of “belonging.”
   5. These days it seems that there is a still a market for the secret pathway to happiness.
      1. Everyone seems to be peddling a secret to happiness. Do this. Buy that. Repeat this mantra. Rub that oil. Place this crystal. Pray these words.
   6. But what if happiness is too small of a goal?
      1. What if we are not meant for happiness?
   7. I do not mean to say that everyone (or anyone) who speaks of happiness is a fake or a charlatan.
      1. Teachers as great as His Holiness the Dalai Lama have books with titles like *The Art of Happiness*.
      2. The late great Muslim scholar Al Ghazzali had a famous title called [*Alchemy of Happiness*](http://www.sacred-texts.com/isl/tah/).
   8. But I want to probe this elusive quest for happiness. I wonder, are we still settling for something too cheap?
      1. I wonder if this “happiness” is not somehow avoiding the real grappling with suffering, with anger, with sadness, with each and every emotion that makes us human?
      2. What if in the quest for a cheap kind of individual happiness, we lose the very grit of life that we all have to confront at some point?
   9. What if we aim for a life that is about being whole?
      1. Whole.
      2. All of it.
         1. Drink ye all – of it.
      3. Living is hidden within dying.
2. This hopeful notion that living is hidden within dying is surely enhanced by the visual glories of autumn.
   1. What artist would ever have painted a season of dying with such a vivid palette if nature had not done it first?
      1. Does death possess a beauty that we — who fear death, who find it ugly and obscene — cannot see?
      2. How shall we understand autumn’s testimony that death and elegance go hand in hand?
   2. For me, the words that come closest to answering those questions are the words of Thomas Merton:
      1. *“There is in all visible things…a hidden wholeness.”*
      2. When we so fear the dark that we demand light around the clock, there can be only one result: artificial light that is glaring and graceless and, beyond its borders, a darkness that grows ever more terrifying as we try to hold it off.
      3. Split off from each other, neither darkness nor light is fit for human habitation.
      4. But if we allow the paradox of darkness and light to be, the two will conspire to bring wholeness and health to every living thing.
   3. Autumn constantly reminds me that my daily dyings are necessary precursors to new life.
      1. If I try to “make” a life that defies the diminishments of autumn, the life I end up with will be artificial, at best, and utterly colorless as well.
      2. But when I yield to the endless interplay of living and dying, dying and living, the life I am given will be real and colorful, fruitful and whole.
         1. A whole life – not a half-life.
      3. May we all heed the widowers’ wisdom: living is hidden within dying.

1. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/11/04/when-the-second-year-of-widowhood-is-harder/?tid=sm_fb&ncid=newsltushpmg00000003> Accessed 11/6/15. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Lisa Randall. *Dark Matter and the Dinosaurs: The Astounding Interconnectedness of the Universe.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)