

“Reigniting! A Sense of Wonder”

A sermon for University Congregational Church

Sunday, June 7, 2020

Rev. Paul Ellis Jackson

Traditional Word

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.

--Psalm 139:13-14

Contemporary word

“Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist once we grow up.”

--Pablo Picasso

"God is an artist. So are we. And we can cooperate with each other. Our creative dreams and longings do come from a divine source, not from the human ego."

--Julia Cameron

Introduction to the sermon series

“Reigniting! A Sense of Wonder”

In 1992, Julia Cameron wrote a useful book called “The Artist's Way”. This book is a guide to help people with artistic creative recovery. The book teaches techniques and exercises to assist people in gaining self-confidence in harnessing their creative talents and skills. A number of exercises are used by the author to show a connection between artistic creativity and a spiritual connection with God. Julia Cameron insists that creative inspiration is from and of a divine origin and influence, that artists seeking to enable creativity need to understand and believe in. "God is an artist. So are we. And we can cooperate with each other. Our creative dreams and longings do come from a divine source, not from the human ego."

“The Artist's Way” proved to be a very popular book. So popular in fact that it was a required text in both of my master's programs. At Phillips Seminary it was one of the main texts in our sermon writing class and I turn to it often when I find myself stuck in

a theological conundrum and can't quite figure out how to express the homiletical idea into a useful illustration.

So great was the success of this first book that in 2016 she published a follow book called "It's Never Too Late to Begin Again" and the purpose behind this book is, as Julia Cameron puts it: "[it] is the distillate of a quarter century's teaching. It is my attempt to answer, 'What next?' for students who are embarking on their 'second act.'" And Robin and I have decided to use this book for our summer sermon series because it deals with this idea of a second act—and many of us in the congregation are embarking on second acts, have embarked on a second act, or see a second act in our near future.—AND because we felt this would be a good touch stone as we think about ways to re-ignite our lives after this closed-in time of social distancing and quarantine. We think the information and exercises in this book will help all of us re-ignite our creativity and find a closer, spiritual connection to the God from where that creativity springs forth from.

The book is designed as a twelve-week course aimed at defining—and creating—the life you want to have as you redefine—and re-create—yourself, this book includes simple tools that will guide and inspire you to make the most of this time in your life and Robin and I will be refining and curating these tools and exercises as we move through the text. I would recommend each Sunday morning having a journal, or some paper and a pencil at hand as we offer you ideas and simple exercises that will help you reignite your childish wonder!

The part of us that creates is childlike, Cameron tells us and it is filled with awe, wonder, alertness to new experiences and an ability to be mesmerized by the sensory wonders of our environment: The strange alien feel to a world blanketed in new fallen snow, amazing scents that fill a well-tended-to kitchen, and the colors and splendor that fill our eyes as we look upon a Kansas summer sunset. Children discover things one step at a time. Tiny details can spark wonder. What child ever said to themselves: "I better finish up my playtime as dinner starts soon"? Children get lost in their imaginations for hours and hours. I have strong memories of myself being lost in play with my Tinker toys for long periods of time—lost in my imagination as I created bridges and spaceships.

As we get older we turn from the things of childhood. As Paul put it in his first letter to the church in Corinth: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways." And for many of us, that's that—we close the door on our wonderful childish imaginations and head into the world of adulthood and responsibilities.

But then one day, we may find ourselves leaving the world of responsibilities and embarking on a new journey—the journey into retirement—we may find ourselves with time again to fill with wonder and excitement—or, more probable, many of us haven't realistically prepared ourselves for the sudden trauma that happens when

we change our lives so dramatically. Many newly minted retirees find themselves depressed and adrift. And this often leads them into negative judgements about themselves: “I should be doing much better”. It’s a struggle sometimes to find enough self-compassion when retirement is what we’re told we spent all of those years working towards!

It is part of our deepest sense of self as members of this unique culture—the USA. Our sense of self is tightly aligned with our work—and when that work stops, we have an existential crisis. For if our work defines us, when it’s no longer there—then what are we? It is human nature to crave a sense of purpose and without one it is only natural that we might panic a bit and feel adrift.

When I turned 50 years old, I made a bold change in my life. I left the world of higher education, of which I had dedicated the previous twenty-five years to and began a new journey with this congregation. It took not a little courage on my part to do this—leave a career I was well-established in and move into work that, while I knew I had a deeply felt call for, I wasn’t sure if I possessed all of the necessary skills to be successful. So far, so good. I’ll continue to let you all be the judge of my work with this congregation!

Julia Cameron wants us to begin working on our memoirs. She wants us to use a writing exercise to help us reignite our sense of wonder. For this first week she asks us to look at our first decade of life and ask ourselves some questions—so here’s your first set of writing prompts—jot these ideas down: When you were a child: Where did you live? Who took care of you? Recall your pets? Write down your very earliest memory. What was your favorite book when you first learned to read? Can you describe a smell from this time of your life—something evocative that when you smell it today sets off a powerful sense of nostalgia? For me, it’s the smell of sizing in clothing. That smell is tightly wound with the excitement of returning to school. Recall where you spend a vacation—or a summer camp you went to—begin exploring your memories and finding something to connect with from early in your life.

There’s an old maxim that goes like this: Do you know how old I will be by the time I learn to play the piano? A: The exact same age you will be if you don’t!

It seems that when we say to ourselves that it is “too late” for us to begin something or learn something new, we’re actually saying to ourselves that we aren’t willing to be a beginner. The need to feel competent is so engrained in us in our culture that we fear the loss of face and possible embarrassment that might come with looking foolish as we try some new endeavor. I say embrace your inner fool! When I switched over to my recumbent bicycle in March of 2016, I was incredibly nervous. I knew there was a bit of a learning curve as my brain had to relearn some sense of

balance on this strange machine. But I really wanted to do this, so I swallowed my pride and asked for some help. Larry Bennett, of KMUW, had sold me the bike and he wanted to make sure I learned how to get going on it, so for one morning in early march of 2016, there were these two grown men over there on Spruce street, looking like complete fools as he held me up and I kept falling over. Eventually I found my balance and I've never looked back, but if I had allowed my fear of looking like a fool to overrule my desire to learn how to ride this new bike, I would have never done so. And I think of the miles and miles I have ridden that machine and the miles and miles ahead of me—tooling around Wichita's excellent bike paths—occasionally running in to one of you and sharing a bit of our biking journey together—the immense pleasure I feel when I have completed a 50-mile ride!

What are you putting off or refusing to start because you're worried of looking the fool? I'll bet you something—anyone who would think you foolish to try something new is maybe someone you don't need in your life? Right? So, Cameron gives us another task to do regarding this: Make a list, number it from one to five and start each sentence with this: It it weren't too late, I would....do that five times on your paper. And then fill in those five blanks. What would you do if you didn't think it was too late? Learn to cook? To sew? To play an instrument? To sing in our choir? To ride a recumbent bike? Fill out your list.

It's this fear then, either real or perceived, of looking foolish, that causes us to back down from our dreams—we never try anything new. I mentioned that drive to be competent and how ingrained it is in all of us—to show even the slightest level of incompetence—of beginner's status—is loath to most of us. For many of us we have an inner negative voice—a censor—who inhibits us from even trying something new. The scenario goes something like this:

I'd love to design clothes. Censor: You're too old to learn fashion design

I'd really love to design clothes: Censor: You're not fashionable

I think I'd like to try: Censor: What a waste of money

I can afford it: Censor: You're really a fool

Do you have that in your head? Do you have a censor stopping you from trying new things? Is that censor sarcastic? Does it poke fun at your dreams? The reality is that it's the voice that is foolish—it's the voice that needs to be shrunk and minimized until you can no longer hear it or feel its effects.

Skepticism appears in many guises and sometimes it's a useful tool in keeping us out of trouble—but too often it keeps us from even beginning to realize a dream, Let's say that you said to yourself—I've always enjoyed acting and once I have more free time I'd like to try it again. And then you never audition, because of that voice—that fear of looking foolish—so, you never make the time and then you never actually go

to the audition. Wichita Community Theater is the birthplace of many foolish dreams! People show up with little or no experience, usually land a small role and the next thing they know they are a part of Wichita's vibrant theater scene. Duane can speak to this better than I can as it happened to him,. A few years ago he told me he'd like to act again—he had acted in high school, in fact, that's where we met, but he had moved into dance for his performance medium and hadn't acted in many years. I told him to audition. He took a deep breath and did so—and started getting roles—he suddenly found his acting talents in demand, and last summer he came home with his first professional acting contract and we were both pretty thrilled about that! Last summer he made his professional acting debut in Roxie's production of "Love, Valor, Compassion" AND he was nominated for the Mary Jane Teall award for Best Supporting Actor. He went THAT far in a few short years!

Julia Cameron wrote in her book that "Many blocked people are actually very powerful and creative personalities who have been made to feel guilty about their own strengths and gifts." And she gives us ways to fight and shrink our censor. The primary one then is understanding that our skepticism is rooted in fear and fear is healed by compassion. The first step towards being less critical of your dreams is to be gentle with yourself. And one of the best ways to begin being gentle with yourself is to practice active kindness in your every-day interactions. Not only towards others, but towards yourself as well. The task Cameron gives us to help us be kinder to ourselves is to list three kind actions you can take on your own behalf. Can you take an afternoon and do something just for yourself that you've put off? Is there a book you've wanted to read but haven't found the time to read it? I know we've just spent a few months in lock-down, but was there something you intended to do but didn't get to it? Carve out some time now. Look at this world with wonder and joy and excitement and begin to dream again.

As we begin to see what life after our lock-down looks like, what is there that you want to do? What new dream is igniting in your spirit? Draw it out, look at it and then start taking concrete steps to make it real! The God of life who inspires us wants no less from you! AMENRESOURCES

<https://juliacameronlive.com/>

Cameron, Julia "It's Never Too Late to Begin Again: Discovering Creativity and Meaning at Midlife and Beyond" Penguin/Random House, New York, 2016