

This past week, my sisters and I and our book club went to New York City to see *Our Town*. We had read a book last summer that heavily featured the play and so we jumped at the opportunity to see it live, even while knowing that we weren't exactly signing up for the most upbeat of evenings in the city. This is where I give the requisite spoiler alert for a play that was written decades ago, so if you don't want to know what happens, plug your ears and you can jump back in in a hot second.

The play centers around the life of a small town, Grovers Corners, New Hampshire, and the every day life of its occupants. There were no props, no set pieces, the audience was encouraged to use their imagination as they watched the everyday mundane events of this town play out. Breakfasts were made, gardens were tended, wood was chopped, milk was delivered. It is normal, hum drum stuff, nothing exciting, nothing overly dramatic, just...life. In the midst of this daily living, two people fall in love, George and Emily. They had lived next door to each other all their lives and so they grow up, get married, and settle into life in Grovers Corners, just like their parents. They have children...and that's when everything stops on a dime in this small town, at least for a brief moment in time.

The third act takes place amidst the gravestones of Grovers Corners' residents. Gravestones that date back before the Mayflower, gravestones of

Civil War veterans, and gravestones of different townspeople you've met over the last hour or so. The audience finds itself there for a burial. Emily's burial. She has died in childbirth with their second baby, and for those small moments, everything in Grovers Corners feels different, because it seems cruel to lose Emily when she was so young.

The play finds its final climax in a conversation between Emily and her mother-in-law. Their ghostly remnants discuss whether or not Emily can go back. If she can go back and relive a moment of her life because it's too hard to face the reality that it's over. She is allowed to and she decides to go back to a random day, her 12th birthday. It should be a guaranteed happy moment without having to see her kids or her husband and feel the pain of not being with them anymore. She goes back and watches the...everyday life...of Grovers Corners. Her mom makes breakfast, the milk gets delivered, the paper gets dropped off, she has to go to school. Ghostly Emily is entirely overwhelmed by the *simplicity* of the everyday and by the fact that they're all so busy going about their daily life that they don't even truly pay attention to each other, they don't look each other in the eye, they don't appreciate the sacredness of the mundane. How did she live her life not appreciating that her mother made her breakfast or the way that her dad took his coffee or the constancy of the milkman? How had she missed it all?

She returns back to her headstone lamenting that she missed out on so much because she was looking for something bigger. The reality was, all the small things of Grovers Corners had made for a very big, very precious thing, *life*, and she had failed to see in its quietest moments that that was enough.

The play simply ends with the main character picking up a lantern and pointing out that another day has come to an end in Grovers Corners. The lights go dim, the echo of a train whistle carries through the night, once again, the train from Albany departs, some people are still awake, some are not, and tomorrow morning it will all start again. 11:00 in Grovers Corners, you all go get some rest. And that's it...life...is the message.

In many ways, we see the same sort of message play out in our gospel this morning, even though on the face of it, it seems as though we are encountering a momentous occasion. And I mean, yes, we are. Jesus arrives at the Jordan to be baptized by John. This is a big deal, and yet, Luke doesn't make much of a thing about it. We don't get any conversation between Jesus and John, no back and forth about thongs of sandals being undone and unworthiness. It's just two cousins going into the water.

We know that John has been preparing for this moment and when it arrives, it has to overwhelm him, but we see none of that. We just get the simplicity of the message: Jesus was baptized by John. That's it. And then

when Jesus emerges from the water, the Holy Spirit breaks forth from the heavens, descends as a dove, and provides a blessing upon Jesus. God's voice echoes from the heavens, "You are my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased." It seems as though this is a moment just between God and Jesus, Jesus hearing this blessing from God as he prepares to begin his ministry. It's a quiet moment, almost a simple moment, especially when you realize that when Jesus receives this blessing...he hasn't done anything yet.

You are my Son, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased. These feel like words that would be fitting as Jesus is preparing to enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, or kneeling in the Garden of Gethsemane, or on the path to Golgotha, or even after an especially profound miracle—the feeding of the 5,000, the raising of Lazarus, walking on water. Yet that is not when we get this moment, these words of blessing. With you I am well pleased. God is pleased with Jesus and Jesus hasn't done anything beyond show up, show up at the Jordan and be baptized. We know nothing truly of Jesus' life up to this point, no miracles, no profound teachings, just living his life as a carpenter's son. And yet it is in this moment that God tells him that God is well pleased with him, that he is beloved. He hasn't done anything spectacular beyond *lived*, beyond coming to this moment open, and he hears

words that you have to imagine would bring tears to one's eyes. You are beloved. With *you*, your person, your being, with you I am well pleased.

I think so often in this world of picture perfect insta-life images, we get caught up in the same blindness that knocked Emily sideways when she returned to her life in *Our Town*. We think everything has to be bigger, better, larger than life. Everything has to be filtered through a lens of social media perfection, the right verbiage so as not to offend anyone or truly let the world see us for who we are deep within. We operate with a heavy veneer over our lives, our hearts, our thoughts, because we don't want anything to penetrate too deeply, we don't necessarily want to be known too deeply, for fear of what the reaction may be. We spend our lives chasing the next big thing, wanting to be somebody, wanting to make some profound impact on the world. We think if we haven't done *something*, we haven't done anything. We think that if life is just Grovers Corners then it isn't nearly enough. We think *we* are not nearly enough.

Yet, the profound truth that arrives for us today is that these words God gives to Jesus at his baptism are the same words that arrived for us at ours and that arrive for us each and every day, no matter where we find ourselves. Jesus simply had to show up, Jesus simply had to be, to hear these words from God and the same holds true for us. There is nothing,

absolutely nothing, zero, zilch, nothing that you have to do for these words of God to come to you and be 100% true, all of the time. You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased. Your very being is enough. Hear that one more time. Your very being is enough. Your very self, sitting here, being here, in this moment, is enough.

More than anything I think that is the gift of this text, not necessarily the message that Jesus came to be baptized to be in communion with us, not necessarily the message that he came to bring a different kind of baptism, but the simple and honest truth that simply by showing up, by being present, by being ourselves, we receive a divine word of belovedness and belonging, acceptance and gracious love. There is no filter you have to put on your life to make you suddenly, photo shopped worthy of God's love. It's already there, it has always been there, and it will continue to be there, no matter what happens. Nothing is going to change it.

Now...this doesn't mean that we're off the hook from all the stuff Jesus calls us to. The loving your neighbor, the freeing the oppressed, the offering grace, all of that is still there, BUT your belovedness *does not* depend upon it. Your worthiness does not depend on it. However, this does become an *Our Town* situation. By hearing this, by knowing it, does it cause us to take it for granted and thus ignore the precious simplicity of life

and opportunity all around us? Do we rest on our laurels knowing God loves us and we are well-pleasing in God's sight and thus just stop functioning in the world with our faith as our guiding light? Do we just shrug our shoulders and say, yes, good for me! God loves me! Got that taken care of! Or do we say, God loves me and look at all the precious, incredible opportunities that presents me with to share it with others? Remind them of their own belovedness? Do we let it infuse into every fiber of our being, every moment of our lives, and impact how we see the world around us, how we move and operate within it?

Emily missed so much of her life because she took for granted the simplicity of what was around her and the false guarantee that it would always be there. Don't do the same thing with your preciousness, beloveds. Don't think God's love is just a simple thing to tuck away and forget about. Don't think that God's love is fleeting and momentary. Don't think that there will always be another chance to share God's love so you'll get to it tomorrow. Show up now. Embrace your preciousness now. Take it in for all it is worth and cherish it. You are God's beloved. With your whole self God is well pleased. Don't miss the opportunity to live into that truth. Don't shun it or try to correct it. It is true and always will be. You are beloved, so go out into the world and act like it. **AMEN!!!**