

Anam Cara – Soul Friend

Jessie Crabtree to First Parish Church, UCC
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Intro to Scripture:

You might recognize today's scripture as the Magnificat, or "Mary's Song of Praise." This passage is more traditionally read during Advent, as it takes place not long after Mary finds out she's pregnant with Jesus. Well, Christmas is in about nine months, so I'm hoping you'll allow it.

What I hadn't realized until recently was that the words that make up this "Song of Praise" were addressed not to God, but spoken in the context of a conversation between two friends, both pregnant women, actually. After being told by the angel that she was expecting a

son, Mary goes to visit her relative, Elizabeth, who's about six months along herself.

And it's in this visit, in the midst of what must have included talk about morning sickness and swollen ankles and maternity... robes(?), that these two women have a pretty intense conversation about how they feel God moving in their lives and in the world around them. And it wasn't until Mary connected with Elizabeth that these stirrings within Mary's soul spilled forth in this prophetic song:

Scripture:

Luke 1:39-56 Mary, Elizabeth, and the Magnificat

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

And Mary said,

'My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,

for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Sermon:

Whenever I hear the Magnificat, I can't help but notice the *fierceness* of these two women together. You have Mary, a teenager, confiding in Elizabeth, an older woman, about who God is to her. With the birth of their sons, Mary sees the "kingdom" as the world knows it being turned upside-down: the proud scattered, the lowly lifted, the hungry filled and the rich sent away empty. Mary was a girl with big dreams for the world she anticipated her son bringing forth. And I'm grateful she had Elizabeth to confide in, so that we also might bear witness to Mary's vision for her son's mission here on Earth.

It's in *this* relationship that I see ties to the ancient Celtic idea of *anam cara*, or "soul friendship." One contemporary Celtic theologian, John Philip Newell, defines a person's *anam cara* as: "the one to whom you reveal the deep stirrings of your soul."

This idea of "soul stirring" is key. Last week Mary Beard talked about Original Blessing, the opposite of Original Sin. Original Blessing highlights how what is deepest within us is not only *not* sinful, but is good and of God.

There's a sort of corollary to Original Blessing, one that highlights not only the goodness, but the *blessed*

uniqueness of each human being, and that helps me understand why "soul friendship" is important.

As the late great theologian, the Rev. Mr. Rogers said, "There is no one quite like you." And I know the man's had his critics over the years, but I think he's right. Wrapped up within our innate belovedness is a blessing that *is* ours alone, but it's not ours to keep. Rather, it was given to us to *share* with others.

There is work to be done that will only be done if *you* do it. There are stories that will only be told if you tell them. Lessons that can only be taught from your experience. Prayer lifted, comfort offered, music and poetry written, businesses and nonprofits launched—that would be done differently, if at all, by any other human on this planet.

And so often, it's another person, a mentor or a friend, who draws that creative, generative work out of us. My favorite literary/pop-culture *anam cara* example is that of C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. They had a famously intense and complicated friendship. Both men had known grief in childhood, and the horrors of WWI, and both were deep seekers with quintessentially Celtic imaginations. Lewis once said that "Friendship is born at that moment when one says to another: *What, you too?*"

I thought I was the only one.” These were both men who were epically geeky about mythology and literature and language, and once they discovered that about each other, they started sharing their writing, and offering feedback and encouragement. Today, many have observed that C.S. Lewis was a largely unsuccessful writer until Tolkien came along. And Tolkien was a chronic non-finisher until Lewis showed up, and insisted he actually finish writing the Lord of the Rings. Together, with each other’s support, they created these worlds that have gone on to inspire generations. They were able to see past their differences, to one another’s soul-stirrings, and help draw them out, into action, into something that could be shared.

One of the things I love most about church is the way that the combination of pastoral teaching and faithful community can help you name that thing that’s been stirring within you. Give you language- a vocabulary- to understand what is moving within your deepest self, and to *believe* in those yearnings as being of the Holy Spirit. How many of you have been sitting in church somewhere when you heard something that gave voice to what had been swirling silently in your soul, that maybe you didn’t even know- or want to admit- was there until you heard it named out loud?

And as cool as that is to experience, it’s important to remember that the Worship Service that happens between these walls isn’t the whole picture of who we are as a church, is it? I think of it like this: If Sunday Worship is the soul’s food- where we go for the bread, the wine, the Word that feeds our spirit- *then* it is in connecting with other seeking, stirring souls that we work out how that nourishment fits into the larger ecosystem of our spiritual life and work.

Now my personality falls pretty firmly in the “introvert” camp, but even I can see that there is something not just valuable, but necessary, in *working through* our understanding of God and Jesus and faith and practice with other seekers. It certainly calls for more vulnerability, to speak aloud your deeper yearnings, or questions, or doubts. And, I know it’s likely that not everyone has found those conversation opportunities

here, or found the right dynamic to open up in that way. But I do believe that it is a huge part of the work of the church to create spaces where people are free to name those stirrings- be they book clubs, support groups, classes, or choir rehearsals- any of those times when two or three or gathered.

Members of this church have already covenanted to *sustain one another through life’s challenges, joys, and sorrows*. It’s often in those times, be they the highs or the lows, that soul-stirrings feel a little sharper and more pronounced. They are sort of “Thin Times” in a person’s life, where the God-within bubbles up a little closer to the surface. As a congregation that has consecrated the practice of sharing those experiences, we are primed to be *anam cara* already.

And I’ve seen it. Over the past year, I’ve seen you all in action - supporting, comforting, and lifting one another. From my little office across the street I see you coming and going, to meetings, book clubs, rehearsals. My phone rings and I sign someone up for a class. My email “dings” and I schedule a space for a new poetry group. I go to change the paper in the copier, and I hear peals of laughter from the Soul of Aging class meeting across the hall. I sit in on a choir rehearsal, and I see you pray together.

And whenever the EarthCare team comes to meet, I think of Mary and Elizabeth, sitting together, daring to envision a better world for the next generation, even as they sat in the shadow of a mighty empire, bloated with proud-hearted princes.

At Christmas, we sing, “Mary, did you know?” Well, don’t tell Amy Grant, but I think Luke 1 (and John 2) have a secret: Mary knew. She knew back then, and she knew thirty years later at the Wedding at Cana, when she saw her son wrestling with his calling, when he might have had some stirring going on. Mary knew it was time for Jesus to turn that water into wine. Mary knew it was time for Jesus to get to work- performing miracles, telling parables, and flipping tables- and kingdoms- upside down. Mary knew.

Call me an optimist, but I like to think that- at our best- parents can be *anam cara* to their children, too.

Because, if we can believe in God's "Original Blessing-" that what is deepest within us is good and of God, then being *anam cara* to one another is no less than calling the light, the goodness, the Godliness, out of each other. The way that Elizabeth's warm, spirit-filled greeting opened the door for Mary to share the song within her own heart.

Anam cara is a call to *magnify* the God who dwells in the other, the God who comes to life in the space between us.

So, all I'm really trying to do here is invite you to recognize and honor how, in your connections, you magnify the light of God. By speaking and by listening, by counseling and by conversing, by praying and by planning, you are unleashing that holy, mysterious, majestic light, and empowering one another to do the work so sorely needed in this world.

So thank you, and Amen.