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*Behold, what you are. **May we become what we receive.*** With these words from St. Augustine, the monk lifted the bread and invited us to communion. *Behold, what you are,* said the monk. ***May we become what we receive,*** replied the congregation.

In late September Michael and I traveled to Cambridge, Massachusetts for a self-guided retreat at the Society of St. John the Evangelist – an Episcopal monastic community located on the majestic Charles River and next to the sprawling Harvard Kennedy School of Government. We went to immerse ourselves in quiet, to indulge the hospitality of the brothers, and to sink ourselves down into the rhythm of thoughtful, spirit-filled worship, four times per day.

Most Episcopalians are unaware that our denomination boasts a long history of monastic orders. The Society of St. John the Evangelist hung their shingle in the US in the mid 1800s, though the order's history dates back far earlier in England. The Cowley Brothers, as they are known, observe a monastic rule that guides most aspects of their life together: worship, relationships, and the practice of their Christian values through hospitality, silence, prayer, stewardship, and justice.

As a group of people, the brothers are also just awesome people, people you want to be around and talk with, each one with their unique quirks and personality. Cowley brothers are serious and hold fast to the rule that guides their daily lives, yet at the same time, they hold that structure lightly – ready to joke and laugh at themselves. They are happy people. The monastery employs a professional chef who crafts delicious, vegetarian, whole grain meals for the community and its guests every, single day. But on every feast day in the church calendar, the brothers are treated to both meat and dessert. Then the chef goes wild with steaming beef bourguignon, and a lavish, butter-rich dessert that would make even Martha Stewart blush. Before Michael and I arrived, the brothers had observed the feast day commemorating the martyrdom by stoning of the apostle Stephen, which, we were told, the community decided was worthy of meat --- but not of dessert. Once home I sent the brothers several large chunks of fancy baking chocolate from Surdyk's as a thank you gift, suggesting maybe they save it for St. Luke's feast day. The Gospeler was thought to have been a physician, and it seemed especially illicit to enjoy a gooey dessert of sugar and saturated fat on his special day. They liked that.

The retreat came toward the end of my sabbatical. I was hoping to use the quiet, the worship, and the infused kindness to reflect on my experiences, to attach some kind of meaningful insight to them, something that could be shared and explained. I wanted space to figure out how to first process, and then talk about, all that had happened in the previous months, and to glean from it what it had to teach me and shape my life going forward. And there, standing in that hallowed sanctuary, the Way presented itself: *Behold, what you are. **May we become what we receive.*** Really, the task was simple - not at all, of course, about tying everything up with a cute and tidy bow of theological insight, but rather, really delighting in all that God had given me and then, in gratitude, finding a way to exude those gifts, and offer some shade of them to others.

I spent the rest of my week at the monastery doing just that – reflecting upon, and giving thanks for, the gifts God gave me on sabbatical.

I thought about the *natural beauty* of the Burren in County Clare, Ireland. It's a limestone valley in which the rock forms are so abstract and aesthetic it feels as if a wild, surrealistic God laid down the whole thing by hand – a landscape in which the angle of the light falls gently enough to bring out the shy presence of each stone – a landscape full of memory that holds the stories of my mother's family going back generations.

I thought about the deep, existential sense of *connectedness* that I felt standing on an island in the middle of the Baltic Sea talking to my father on the phone thousands of miles away, and showing him the lighthouse that his grandfather ran, the house where his mother grew up and four of her siblings died, and the baptismal font in the family church that blessed the heads of 8 generations of our family.

I thought about the much needed attention I was able to give to *relationships* that mean something to me: members of my extended family, neighbors, my best friend from seminary, clergy colleagues, how in some cases I was able to ask for and receive *forgiveness* that needed to be asked for, and start *healing* long overdue.

I thought about biking hundreds of miles across Iowa (411, to be exact), experiencing a physical *strength* and *wholeness* I have never felt before in my life, arriving at a new peace with, and respect for, my physical self.

I could go on and on and on and I so hope that you will invite me to talk about the sabbatical in-depth. I am full to the brim and overflowing with things to share with you, and give to you.

If all that wasn't enough, before I left the monastery, much to my surprise, a second epiphany presented itself. All these gifts God gave me, all the gifts I had received: *beauty, connectedness, belonging, generosity, forgiveness, healing, strength, wholeness* – all of them, are around me and inside of me all the time. While I had to go on great adventures in extraordinary circumstances to see and understand, God's gifts are as ordinary and plentiful as breathing. In late fall, for example, Lake Harriet begins to freeze, forming little icicles along the shore that sound like a quiet gamelan as the waves lap up against them. **Natural beauty.** On Thursday when walking our dog I struck up a conversation with a long-time neighbor who shared with me his incredible pain and worry about his adult daughter. **Rootedness and connection.** At our last meeting my endurance trainer looked me in the eye and said, "Your body is strong enough to get you to your goal. So cut the doubt." **Strength.**

"We shall not cease from exploration," wrote C.S. Lewis in his poem *Little Gidding*, "and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started, and know the place for the first time." Lewis' prose echoes the 11th century mystic Meister Eckhart, who wrote that there is "no such thing as a spiritual journey." If there were a spiritual journey, he wrote, it would be only a quarter inch long, though many miles deep. We don't have to go away outside of ourselves to come into real conversation with our souls, with the mysteries of the spiritual world, with the abundant gifts God gives. The eternal, Eckhart

would suggest, is at home – within us. Or, as the Celtic theologian John O’Donohue once wrote, “The eternity in every human being is a light sleeper, and it can awaken at the slightest rustle.”

I think it’s so easy to overcomplicate the world of the spiritual and what it means to live a faithful life pleasing to God. It may just be that it’s as simple as being awake to the gifts God gives us, and then becoming what we receive to other people. Or, even more simply, it’s about giving back to God some small fraction of what we receive from God. Not because God demands it, but because the giving is a kind of gift for ourselves, too. It’s hard to miss this simple formula in our prayers and scriptures this morning: *You call us to be holy as you are holy*, we prayed in our Collect. *You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy*, God tells Moses. *So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the Gospel, but also our own selves*, the Epistle writers tell the Thessalonians. *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind: this is the greatest and first commandment*, Jesus reminds the Pharisees. Be awake to God’s gifts inside and around you. Allow them fill your hungry and empty places full to overflowing. As an act of worship and thanksgiving, faithfulness and reverence, “re-gift” to God and neighbor.

Last week, my husband Michael told me a story that he unearthed in his research that, for me, ties all these pieces together and gets us to the starting line. There used to be a wild pea called a mouse bean that grew plentifully along the Missouri River. For centuries, this meaty, protein-filled, low fat, legume was an important, reliable food source for the Lakota people until the beans were largely wiped out by flooding caused by dams built in the 1940s and 50s. Now, the mouse beans were known to grow in tiny disparate pods so small it made their harvest very time consuming. According to tribal elders, rather than laboriously picking individual beans on the wandering, leggy plants, women would dig up the large caches of beans gathered and stowed away by mice. It wasn’t just taking what the mice had collected, though. Gathering from mouse caches always included a ceremony where women sang songs to the mice, asking their permission to open the caches, and reassuring them that enough beans would be left for the mice to survive the winter. At the ceremony’s end, most importantly, the women gifted the mice with bits of dried meat, fruit, and corn in gratitude for what they took.

I believe in a God who is a thoughtful and creative gift-giver. I believe in a God who lavishly bestows beauty, inspiration, connection, healing, peace, purpose, and strength in ways specific to each person. Each of us needs to be filled in different ways, with different gifts. But regardless of what they are and how they present themselves, God’s gifts are abundant and endless. Like the mice, God doesn’t require a trade but the act of gratitude is, in itself, a gift to us. Giving feels good. This morning is Consecration Sunday – which is really just another opportunity for us to praise and thank God for the gifts we are given. In the moments ahead I invite you to survey the cache of gifts God has offered you just in the past week. Name them, breathe them in, give thanks. Then, reopen your card and throw a few more bushels of corn into your gift. Not because you have to, but because you can. Because giving begets giving. It feels good. And God is worthy of thanks and praise. AMEN.