

YOUR BASIC, GENERIC MAY SERMON

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Schedules do strange things to my effort to respond to the world in rational and logical ways. Schedules are supposed to allow us to control the forces which forever threaten to make a chaos of our lives. Schedules sometimes take over and reduce me to indentured servitude. Several years ago, in an effort to respond to the unpredictable manner in which the post office delivers the Newsletter, we began announcing sermons three weeks in advance. Ever since, this has forced me to think farther ahead about sermons than I am comfortable doing. However, in this complex and intricate world, when schedules compete with comfort, schedules usually win.

So it was that I was sitting in my study several weeks ago, having just completed my material for the newsletter. I was busy trying to cobble together a sermon for the following Sunday. Suddenly Caroline Lockwood, our office manger, came into to tell me that I had misread the calendar. She needed one more sermon title. What sermon would I be preaching on May 19? I looked at the half-finished sentence on the screen before me, and in exasperation told her that I didn't know what I was preaching this Sunday, let alone what I would be talking about on May 19.

Caroline quietly left the office and went back to her desk, leaving me to feel guilty. After all, I was the one who had urged that we develop a newsletter schedule that would get information to people in a timely fashion. She was only trying to do what I had asked her to do. On the other hand, I really did not know what I would be prepared to offer as a sermon on May 19. So, in a moment of frustration, I jotted down a sermon topic on a piece of paper and handed it to her. The title I had chosen was "Your Basic, Generic May Sermon." Caroline looked at it, looked back at me, said nothing and began to type it into the Newsletter. And thus, as a result of the exigencies of inexorable and inescapable schedules, a sermon title was born. As a consequence, this morning, I intend to muse with you about May and the role it plays in my life.

"It's May," sang Oscar Hammerstein in his lyrics for the musical, *CAMELOT*. "It's May; it's May, the lusty month of May." In his musical, *CAROUSEL*, the same Oscar Hammerstein sang, "May was full of promises, but she didn't keep quick enough for some...."

May is a strange and curious month, a time of ancient legends and arcane lore, a season rich with possibilities, and deep, abiding contradictions.

Do any of you remember the custom of the May basket? A practice which was dying into memory when I was a child decreed that on the first of May children collected baskets of

spring flowers and gave them to teachers or parents or secretly deposited them on the door-step in front of the homes of friends, celebrating both the coming of spring and the enduring importance of human relationships.

Have any of you heard the old story which promises that if you wash your face in the morning dew on the first day of May, your freckles will disappear, and your complexion will be clear and fine and unblemished?

These pale remnants of ancient practices serve to remind us that in archaic cultures, early May was welcomed for its promise of light and warmth, of fertility and health. Celtic peoples lighted bonfires, the Beltane fires, and drove their cattle between the two great blazes to ensure fertility. Young men and women, seeking the same blessing, raced between the fires or leaped over them. Phallic maypoles, decorated with strips of cloth or hide representing the rays of a newly strengthened sun, were the focus of dances among the tribes of northern Europe and the natives of North America. People deeply rooted in the rhythms of the natural world found the coming of spring an occasion which demanded echoing expressions of the natural cycles within the human community. And the coming of spring after a hard winter was a time for unfettered celebration of the revolution which had brought hope in place of despair.

In our time, the seasonal imagery of nature having been replaced by a cerebral and political understand of our world and our place in it, early May has become a pale reflection of that ancient and lusty time of celebration. The revolutions we celebrate on May Day or Cinco de Mayo are political revolutions, rooted in history rather than nature, a distant memory of a time when the poor, when the outcast, when the workers still dared hope that by a change of government or economic system a new world of hope and promise might be ushered in, and a time of peace and plenty established not as part of a natural cycle but as a permanent consequence of deliberate human effort. Indeed, in my childhood, our own government distanced itself from even this faint hope, by designating the first day of May as "Law Day," a deliberate and conscious repudiation of the very idea of revolution, and a celebration of the conviction that nothing good ever comes except by the slow grinding and the inexorable working of the established system.

It is a good thing that Oscar Hammerstein's *CAMELOT* was set in another time and another place. It is hard to find the "lusty month of May" beneath the asphalt callouses of contemporary society. Unless, of course, you dare to go outside, and open the doors of perception to what is happening in the small spaces which have escaped the accretions of a post-traditional civilization. Hidden in the corners of our world, almost out of our line of vision, the celebration of lusty May continues unabated.

Above the door to Community House, a pair of finches has found a ledge and there, outside the usual line of sight, they have set up house-keeping. If you are still enough and watch, you will see them flying from nest to world and back again, engaging in a lusty, lyrical aerial dance which celebrates the coming of May. My mind tells me that these little birds are busily engaged in tending their young, that they are hard at work

incubating the future, and I am sure that is true. But I watch them, and I wonder whether sometimes the manner of their dance through the air is not an expression of something else. And when I am awakened before dawn by the song of birds I know, at a level deeper than that reason, that their singing is not just instinct or necessity; it is a voicing of something akin to a love of life.

They are but one instance of a phenomenon which is present all around us. The squirrels are released from winter doldrums and are dancing their own May dance up and down the trunks of trees, leaping from limb to limb and chasing each other through the tree tops. Since we have claimed their woodlands, they have moved their celebration to our lawns and backyards. And if we watch them for any length of time, scrabbling up and down the trees, chattering at us and each other, posing like perfect statues on the fence post, it is hard to escape the conviction that this behavior is not more than an expression of necessity, that this behavior reveals something akin to joy.

Nor is this joy confined to the untamed world. My elderly little dog, Bart, is too staid and sophisticated--indeed, perhaps too arthritic--to jump with joy at the coming of the spring. He ignores the coming and going of the birds; he regards the foolish squirrels with utter disdain. But on sunny mornings, he walks with stiff dignity out into the yard, finds a spot where he can lean against the back fence, facing into the rays of the warming sun. There he sits, still, unmoving, his muzzle toward the sun, his eyes growing dreamy and unfocused. And as I watch him, I recognize the attitude, the expression, the body language. I know it is an egregious anthropomorphism, but if I were forced to describe what he is doing, sitting motionlessly in the sun, I would have to confess to you that I believe he is meditating. In some canine way that I cannot explain, he has become one with this lusty, effervescent, May time.

Everywhere we look, the world is engaged in small, quiet celebrations of May time come again. Were I to color the month of May, I would need a palette with an infinite number of shades of green. Driving along route 78, I see hillsides clothed in vibrant greens, some deep and dark, some faint and new and others reflecting every gradation between. In the shrubs outside the door of the church, small bursts of new growth explode like living fireworks out of the dark green of last winter's endurance. At the corner of the church, ferns, like living green springs, uncoil themselves out of the dark earth and into the warm light. The dogwood we planted half a dozen years ago unfolds new green leaves in celebration of the sun. Everywhere in infinite shades of fragile green, the world celebrates the lusty, lascivious, vibrant, month of May.

There is nothing in the world more powerful than the forces which are unleashed in May. May is full of promises, the most important of all promises, and though she doesn't keep them quick enough for some, she always keeps them. But May is mercurial. From day to day she changes, defying our expectations and our preconceptions. Cold, blustery, warm, welcoming, presenting one face and then another, May is not a month you can settle down with, like August. May is elusive and evasive and hard to define. May is windows open to the world one day, and furnace running the next day. May is contradictions and a refusal to be tamed to convention. May is a hint and a promise and May is a warning.

If May is the month of hope and promise, of lusty life and boundless joy, it is also a month which reminds us of the brevity of each season, and the evanescent, fleeting quality of all existence. Here it is, only nineteen days into the month and already the crocus is a faint memory. Already the proud tulip has wilted, leaving only a lonely green spear where the blossom once was. Already the ornamental cherry blossoms have fallen to the ground like pink snow, swept away by the mindless winds or the householder's broom. Already lusty May is tending toward staid, stolid, summer.

It is no accident, I think, that we celebrate Mother's Day in the middle of the month, a reminder to us that spring times's youthful freedom inevitably leads to mature responsibility and duty, a deeper kind of love, a stronger kind of relationship, a different quality of life. Nor is it surprising that we end the month remembering those who have died. The month which begins with the fertility symbols of the maypoles and beltane fires, ends, in our culture at least, at the graveyard. The month which begins with a focus on new life, which celebrates the birth of promise and the nurturing of the future, ends with a contemplation of death and the completion of life's journey.

May is the month which reminds me most strongly and gently of my mortality, the month which celebrates that mortality, the month which roots the cycles of our lives deep in the cycles of the seasons, in the cycles of the planet, in the cycles of the universe. I watch the birds incubating the future by repeating the ancient patterns which define their lives, and I sense in their instinctive responses a quality which I envy--a joy and an at-homeness in this universe which allows them to sing in the face of darkness and uncertainty and death. I watch the squirrels, embracing life with an abandon which is instinctive response and somehow more than just instinctive response, and again I sense a mindless belonging which I would emulate--a belonging rooted in joyful acceptance of the givenness of life. I watch my old dog sitting like a furry Buddha in the spring sunshine. I remember the puppy he was and I suddenly realize that while I was not watching, he has acquired a strange dignity and peace I seldom possess--an ability to revel in the simple gift of warm sunlight.

May, lusty, full of promise, inviting me to forego some of the striving, to fall away from my rational schedules and rest my soul in the deeper schedules which are written in the seasons, and the cycles, imprinted in the patterns of human community and deep in the genes. May, offering me the lessons and the examples of birds and squirrels, of flowers and ferns, quiet reminders that as the seasons come and the seasons go, we, like the seasons, wax and wane and that our living and our dying are part of a larger pattern, are expressions of a meaning deeper and richer and more profound than we may ever know. May, infinitely green and clothed in infinite gradations of green, inviting me to find ways to live in the moment, to resist the lure of anticipation and probability. May, reminding me that life is a green fire which burns with an immeasurable intensity. Inevitably it must consume us all. But the burning that is life is worth the price we pay in the end.

May invites me not only to accept the ways of necessity, but to rejoice in the rhythms which flow through me and come to focus in me. May calls me to see in this reflexive

universe a revelation of who I am and what my life means at a deeper level than history and reason would justify. I often remember these words my colleague, George C. Whitney once wrote:

If I should die (and die I must) please let it be in spring
When I, and life up-budding shall be one
And green and lovely things shall blend with all I was
And all I hope to be.

The Chemistry

Of miracle within the heart of love and life abundant
Shall be mine, and I shall pluck the star-dust and shall know
The mystery within the blade
And sing the wind's song in the softness of the flowered glade.

May is the season when I am called to resist the tyranny of artificial schedules, to relax into the isness of my world, to be open to the reality of the moment, to be accepting of the necessity which binds my being, to revel in the lusty fullness of the world, to wait in patience the realization of the promises and let go fears and regrets. May invites the soul to soar, the throat to sing, the feet to dance, the heart to rejoice in the great and deep pattern of life and birth and fulfillment and death, the pattern in which we are all caught, the green fire in which we are refined and renewed and restored and reclaimed.