

WILLA CATHER'S *O PIONEERS!*

A sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
July 6, 2014

Jesus tells the crowds in Galilee in today's gospel lesson<sup>i</sup> that he is gentle and humble in heart. He promises that if people learn from him -- take on his yoke -- they will find rest for their souls. For his yoke is easy and his burden is light.<sup>ii</sup> In fact, unlike the hard-life ascetic John the Baptist who preceded him, Jesus came eating and drinking, according to Matthew. As a result, he was condemned by his enemies as a glutton and drunkard, who sat down at the table with anyone, including tax collectors and sinners.<sup>iii</sup> How appropriate that communion -- the sharing of a common meal with all who wish to be in companionship with him -- becomes the central sacrament of the Christian tradition. It all begins with a gentle and humble heart.

Willa Cather ends her 1913 novel *O Pioneers!* with these words, "Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth." Yet, Alexandra's heart for much of the novel seems strangely closed, at least to other people. She becomes estranged from her brothers, develops almost no close friendships, and never romantically falls in love. Saving Alexandra's heart is a central theme of the book, I believe, and it's what I'd like to speak with you about today -- in the hope that it might both elucidate the gospel lesson and also help us personally to find more gentle and humble hearts.

*O Pioneers!* is a great American story, appropriate to a Fourth of July weekend. It's set in the heartland, on the plains of Nebraska. As it begins in the nineteenth century, immigrants from a variety of European ancestries are trying to realize the American dream by taming the wild land -- Swedes, Norwegians, Russians, Germans, French among them. Alexandra's father, John Bergson, lays dying at the age of 46, broken after losing his cattle in a blizzard, his hogs from cholera, a valuable stallion to a rattlesnake bite, and two sons to childhood illnesses. Not only that, but also his crops have failed time and again.<sup>iv</sup> On his deathbed, he calls his three adult children around him, age 17 and up. "Boys," he says wearily, "I want you to keep the land together and to be guided by your sister...I want no quarrels among my children, and so long as there is one house there must be one head. Alexandra is the oldest, and she knows my wishes."<sup>v</sup> His two adult sons are strapping and strong, but Alexandra is definitely the brains of the operation, helping to keep the farm sustainable while many others around the Bergsons have failed in what seems to be a very hostile wilderness. The reader is told that in his daughter John Bergson recognized a strength of will and simple direct way of thinking things out that was not present in his sons. And so, reluctantly, but with confidence, he entrusted to her "the future of his family and the possibilities of his hard-won land"<sup>vi</sup> of 640 acres.

Today's reading from Psalms describes a beautiful queen-to-be, decked with gold-woven robes but always subservient to the king she is to marry: "Since he is your lord, bow to him."<sup>vii</sup> Alexandra is also described as always attractively dressed and physically beautiful, with a shining mass of reddish-yellow hair; by contrast to the

Biblical princess, however, she is definitely in charge of the males in her family. In turn, her brothers are constantly complaining about it behind her back. Over time, with her business sense and love of the land, her imagination married to careful research, and her willingness to experiment and take calculated risks, Alexandra builds the family farm into one of the most successful and prosperous in the region. When others are losing faith, selling and running, Alexandra -- over her brothers' objections -- is mortgaging the homestead to buy more land at rock bottom prices.

Sixteen years after her father's death, Alexandra's foresight has paid off. Her family has large holdings with telephone wires humming along white roads that run at right angles and create the vast checkerboard of what we now know as the breadbasket of America. When the first of her brothers had married, the land was equally divided as their father had asked on his death bed, but subsequently Alexandra had continued to build her holdings, while her brothers just held and worked what they already owned.

Now, how is Alexandra getting along in matters of the heart? First and foremost are her feelings for the land, which she approached with "love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it... She felt as if her heart were hiding down there."<sup>viii</sup> Her best friend growing up was a younger boy named Carl, who leaves at the age of 18 to become an engraver in St. Louis. They were never romantically involved, but neither has had any other close friend. As Alexandra puts it, "We've liked the same things and we've liked them together, without anybody else knowing. And we've had good times, hunting for Christmas trees and going for ducks and making our plum wine together every year."

As she explains to Carl, "Somehow it will take more courage to bear your going than everything that has happened before."<sup>ix</sup> As he leaves, Alexandra intones, "Now I shall have nobody but Emil. But he is my boy, and he is tender-hearted."<sup>x</sup>

Emil is Alexandra's little brother, more than a dozen years younger than her two adult brothers. She's more than sixteen years older than Emil herself, and Alexandra treats him like a son, spoiling him in the eyes of his older brothers. She grooms him to go away to college, where he becomes captain of the track team, plays in the University band, and prepares to go on to law school. It almost feels as if she is growing him, though, like the favored crop in the field. Meanwhile, just before Emil goes to college, a childhood friend of his comes back from Omaha to live in the local area. Marie is a very attractive woman of Bohemian descent, now married. Alexandra and Marie then develop a friendship, despite their age difference.

Sixteen years after he leaves, Carl returns to Nebraska in transition from his engraving career to seeking gold in Alaska. He's amazed to find out how prosperous Alexandra has become: "Measured by your standards here, I'm a failure. I couldn't buy even one of your cornfields. I've enjoyed a great many things, but I've got nothing to show for it all." Alexandra retorts, "But you show for it yourself, Carl. I'd rather have had your freedom than my land..."<sup>xi</sup> She's also very pleased to have him back and secretly hopes that he'll stop traveling now and that they'll get married. However, Alexandra's two oldest brothers see Carl as a gold digger in Nebraska, simply come to share in Alexandra's wealth. In a terminal confrontation with Alexandra, her brothers claim that despite the earlier legal division of land, "The property of a family really belongs to the men of the family, no matter about the title... You can't expect us to sit

like stumps and see you done out of the property by any loafer who happens along."<sup>xii</sup>

The brothers then go talk to Carl. The next thing Alexandra knows is that after four weeks in town, Carl is leaving again, asking her to give him a year to get something to show for himself.<sup>xiii</sup>

We learn well into the book what nourishes Alexandra through all the lack of sustaining personal relationships in her life. Her heart has been ignored, as the narrator tells us because "Her training had all been toward the end of making her proficient in what she had undertaken to do. Her personal life, her own realization of herself, was almost a subconscious existence."<sup>xiv</sup> But she has had a recurrent, almost mystical experience since childhood, which sounds like what Jesus might be offering in this morning's gospel lesson. Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest...for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your soul."<sup>xv</sup> As Alexandra got older, this mystical sensation came to her sometimes when she was going to bed tired -- physically and mentally aching from fatigue. She would have the "illusion of being lifted up bodily and carried lightly by some one very strong. It was a man, certainly, who carried her, but he was like no man she knew...She never saw him, but with eyes closed, she could feel he was yellow like sunlight, and there was the smell of ripe cornfields about him."<sup>xvi</sup>

In a terrible incident near the end of the book, Alexandra loses both her brother Emil and her friend Marie. They are discovered to be lovers and shot dead by Marie's jealous husband. Alexandra's worst fears of the dangers of matters of the heart have now been made manifest. In her mind she condemns Emil and Marie and forgives their killer. She concludes there is something fundamentally wrong, as she puts it, in

being warm-hearted and impulsive, as she thinks of Marie and Emil as being.<sup>xvii</sup> After a trip to the graveyard, as she lies in bed one night, "it occurred to her for the first time that perhaps she was actually tired of life. All the physical operations of life seemed difficult and painful. She longed to be free from her own body, which ached and was so heavy. And longing itself was heavy; she longed to be free of that."<sup>xviii</sup>

Almost immediately, she has that mystical visitation of what I would call Jesus, although she doesn't, quite. Here's how it's described in the story: She was "lifted and carried lightly by some one very strong. He was with her a long while this time, and carried her very far, and in his arms she felt free from pain. When he laid her down on her bed again, she opened her eyes, and, for the first time in her life, she saw him, saw him clearly, though the room was dark, and his face was covered. He was standing in the doorway of her room. His white cloak was thrown over his face, and his head was bent a little forward. His shoulders seemed as strong as the foundations of the world. His right arm, bared from the elbow, was dark and gleaming, like bronze, and she knew at once that it was the arm of the mightiest of all lovers. She knew at last for whom it was she had waited, and where he would carry her. That, she told herself, was very well. Then she went to sleep."<sup>xix</sup>

Carl hears of the tragedy of Emil and Marie and comes back from Alaska, where he's spent the last year. He still doesn't have anything financially to show for himself, but he's working with a business partner whom he trusts in the Klondike. As he explains, "We haven't turned up millions yet, but we've got a start that's worth following."<sup>xx</sup> Now, finally, with Alexandra in her forties, they decide to marry. Alexandra promises to follow him to the Klondike in the spring, but he promises never

to ask her to leave her Nebraska farm for good. Then there's the line that shows that Alexandra's heart is finally open, not just to God through her experiences with Jesus, but fully to another human being: "I think we shall be very happy [Carl]. I haven't any fears. I think when friends marry, they are safe."

So Alexandra's heart is saved as she slowly becomes more conscious that her business proficiency, although sustaining for her family and vocationally meaningful for her, has limited her personal life and her own full realization of herself as a loving person. Alexandra is an exemplary American hero for us on Independence Day weekend. She's a true pioneer -- enterprising, creative, self-made, and committed to leaving a legacy for others. She realizes the American Dream and shares it with her family. She's passionate about her work: she belongs to the land...to the heartland of America. She pays the price of a closed heart, however, which it takes her more than forty years to open.

Jesus asks that we come to him, all of us who are weary and carrying heavy burdens. He will give us rest. Take on his yoke and learn from him who is gentle and humble in heart. In him we will find rest for our souls. Unlike the yokes under which we ordinarily labor, his yoke is easy and his burden is light. In fact, in Alexandra's experience, if we can be open ourselves to God's presence in the depths of our weariness, we will in fact be lifted up bodily and carried lightly. We will be freed from suffering and pain. God is the mightiest of all lovers. And through God, we can be taught fully to experience love with our fellow human beings as well. Not just romantic love, which is often as fleeting as 4th of July fireworks and sometimes as

dangerous, but deep friendship, in which we may be both happy and safe for the duration of our lives. For that may we give thanks! AMEN.



## PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

July 6, 2014

(Please join me now in the Prayers of the People, adapted from the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson;<sup>xxi</sup> The response after I say "O God, in your graciousness" is "Hear our Prayer.") Let us pray:

O God, may we enter into the reality of the roses under our windows, for they make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with you, O God, today. But we postpone or remember. We do not live in the spirituality of the present, but with reverted eye lament the past, or heedless of the riches that surround us, stand on tiptoe to forsee the future. May we realize that we cannot be happy or strong until we too live with nature in the present, above time.

O God, in your graciousness, **Hear our prayer.**

As we think about our community, the nation, and the world, O God, may we remember that people will always worship something -- may we have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts -- but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character. May we therefore be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.

O God, in your graciousness, **Hear our prayer.**

How many people do we meet here in this university and in the local community, O God, to whom we scarcely speak, whom yet we honor and who honor us. How many

we see in the street, or sit with in church, whom though silently, we warmly rejoice to be with. May we read the language of these wandering eye-beams.

O God, in your graciousness, **Hear our prayer.**

As we think of those who are sick or in need or in trouble, O God, realize that we have a great deal more kindness, O God, than is ever spoken. The whole human family is bathed with an element of love like a fine ether. We ask your blessings on those on today's prayer list, and all the world's suffering people.

O God, in your graciousness, **Hear our prayer.**

We think too of those who have died, and those who mourn them. No number tallies all of them and all of nature up, though on this week's prayer list we remember in particular Jerry, Dionicia, Pat, Bryant and Phil. We also remember all those whom we hold now in the silence of our hearts....

You gather all, O God, along the centuries, from tribe to tribe and race to race. Your wreath shall miss no one.

O God, in your graciousness, **Hear our prayer.**

May we not forget to celebrate our good fortunes and our blessings, O God. There are those on today's prayer list who give thanksgiving for their work, who are observing birthdays, and who are in love. We pray for all those who celebrate as well as all those in need. We sing of golden mornings. We sing the heart courageous, the youthful, eager mind. We sing of hopes undaunted, of friendly ways and kind.

O God, in your graciousness, **Hear our prayer.**

AMEN.

## BENEDICTION

And now, may we have faith in life, to do wise planting,  
That the generations to come may reap even more abundantly than we.  
May we be bold in bringing to fruition the golden dreams  
of human kinship and justice.  
This we ask that the fields of promise become fields of reality. AMEN.

V. Emil Gudmundson

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30.

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 11: 29-30.

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 11: 18-19.

<sup>iv</sup> Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!* (New York: Bantam, 1989), p. 14.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>vii</sup> Psalm 45:11.

<sup>viii</sup> Cather, *O Pioneers!* pp. 42, 45.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105, 107.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>xv</sup> Matthew 11: 28, 29.

<sup>xvi</sup> Cather, *O Pioneers!* p. 131.

<sup>xvii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>xix</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xx</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

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xxi Ralph Waldo Emerson, selections as quoted in the Unitarian Universalist Association, *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 44, 79, 556, 563, 661.