

When King Solomon described the work and wisdom and wealth of this world, he used a word that is translated as “meaningless.” ***“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”*** Literally, the Hebrew word means *breath* or *vapor*. Think of it as the vapor that forms when you breath out on a cold winter’s day. There for a moment, and then gone.

But that doesn’t mean that we should give up living and learning and earning. After all, these are blessings from the Lord, including the godly *satisfaction* that comes from faithful use of these gifts and opportunities God gives. But he calls on us to have the proper perspective and the proper priorities, and the proper rapport with the only one who matters. Oh, we’ll come with all kinds of ideas for doing things differently, you know, our *own* way of doing things and not doing things. But as Solomon declares, ***...without [God], who can eat or find enjoyment? [No,] ...to the man who pleases him, God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness.***

And so today, I’d like to share a story with you. It is called *Lily* and was written as a parable to illustrate what our readings for today talk about: Finding true treasure in the fullness of Christ. I encourage you to get comfortable. It will take about 20 minutes. But as you listen, listen for connections to our readings for today, listen for attitudes in your own heart, and listen for the promise that is true treasure.

Three sisters lived on the edge of a wood – an older, middle, and a younger. They caught the summer sunlight all day long, since their dwelling was on the south side of that wood; and each did something different with the day and the light.

Few took notice when the elder was born. She had been a plain sort, a simple, skinny sprout growing at a busy pace. But she’d been born with a will, and she said “I’ll *make* them notice me! So she tied up her hair and went to work. She produced a flower that looked like a purse, pale and small and forgettable, and no one noticed, and she said, “Just wait. They’ll

notice me.” She went to work. She made ten of these flowers and more, twenty, fifty, a hundred and more, and she hung them like socks in the sunlight, and still no one noticed. But she said, “You’ll see. They’ll notice me.” Each of her flowers filled up with the sunlight, and then this was the stuff that she worked with. All day long she ground the sunlight, as though it were meat, and she kneaded and squeezed it and pushed it and she patted it until her stem and her pedicels ached. Water she added and sugars and vitamins, valuable ingredients, basically healthy, though nothing so tasty as spice: this sister knew nothing of spice or excitement. Of the sunlight, then, and of the uncommon amount of work, she produced a food, long like a sausage, moisty green and crisp if you ate it now, nutty and hard and wholesome if you waited until later.

This sister’s name was Bean Plant. Soon everyone noticed her. Several hundred members of the Family Fowl made her acquaintance and praised her labor by eating it. And squirrels, who ate the nut sitting up, gnawing politely and silently, took dinner with her. And before that the Host of Rabbits had praised her salad. Everyone noticed her. Of sunlight and labor she fed a thousand stomachs.

And so it was that she could raise her head very high and say, “See? I’m a very important person. How could all of these do without me? They couldn’t eat at all, at all. They need me.”

The middle sister, on the other hand, produced nothing. She had no desire to weave or whittle, to cook or sew, to hammer or dig or work at a thing. “I,” she said, “am important just as I am.” And she smiled exquisite smiles on all around her, and all said, “To be sure!”

For when Marigold was born, *everyone* took notice. She was simply beautiful. And when she grew, her blossoms burst forth *like* the sunlight itself, golden-yellow, full and glowing, beatific altogether. The Grandmother Elms said, “Oh.” The Willows, her aunts, and all of them spinsters, wept to see such brightness in the world. A hundred suitors stood behind her, tall and handsome, dark and green, named Spruce, to a man, made moans because she wasn’t dancing with them. And what did she do with the sunlight? Why, she stood in it, was all. She let it shine on her, to everyone’s gratification. Happy the souls who saw her, she thought; happy the sun to touch

her; and happiest *she* to receive such attentions.

But wasn't she grander than the sun after all? "Of course," she sighed, patting her hair. "I am a knockout. What would the world do without me?"

Bean Plant and Marigold would sometimes discuss their sister. Nor did they lower their voices when they did. They talked about her as though she weren't there, for she was a fool, they thought, and somewhat dim in her brains and helpless, and how could she mind?

"What of Lily?" they said, and they shook their heads.

"What of Lily indeed." Lily, the youngest of the three.

The child had nothing whatever to recommend her, neither beauty nor skill. She was fat and flat and green, her tongue stiff and thick; she could not dance to the wind nor produce a single kernel of food; she looked like a walking-stick stuck in the ground and forgotten, no reason to be there, no reason at all. Why even *she* had searched through her whole being *herself* and had found nothing of worth.

But what bothered her sisters the most was her habit of talking to the sun. The child was addled, dreamy, and deluded; and who was to say how poorly that might reflect upon her two sisters so up in the world? They had their reputations to consider.

"The sun is good for food," Bean Plant told her, "but the sun can't talk."

"Maybe not, and maybe so," said Lily, exasperating the busy sister.

"The sun is good for radiance," Marigold told her, "but the sun can't talk."

"Maybe not, and maybe so," said Lily, irritating the beautiful sister.

But it seemed to Lily that the sun *did* talk. Oh, not in words that anyone could hear, actually. But what he *did* was his talking. To rise in the morning and to peep at her from the greening east and to warm her to the root was his way of saying, "Good," and she said, "Morning," and together, then, they said, "Good Morning." And when he did not pause one second in the sky, but crossed it slowly, certainly, surely in such a way as might be trusted absolutely, it seemed to her that he was saying, "Good," and she said, "Day," and together they said, "Good day." And when he

laid down in a purple, westerly bed and grew very big just before he shut out the light, as though he were stretching and yawning, that was how he said, "Good"; and she never, never said, "Bye," for she would be sad if he went away forever. No, she said, "Night," and so they said, "Good night" together.

This is what Lily did with the sun: she had conversations with him, and always his word was, "Behold, it is very good"; and always her word said *what* was very good – and that was something, since her sisters words were, "Useless and ugly, idle and plain, and worthless altogether." But Lily never stopped listening to him however they scorned her, because she thought that one day he might say to her, "I love you," which would be a very important thing not to miss, since she knew in her soul that she was a very *unimportant* person, but loving might make a difference.

"The sun is not a somebody," said Bean Plant and Marigold.

And Lily said, "Maybe not, and maybe so."

And her sisters said, "Ugh! You are impossible."

And Lily said, "That's true."

Then it came to pass that a sadness settled on Lily, and that was further aggravation to her sisters. Lily stupid was one thing, Lily sad was another and noxious altogether.

Dew, it seemed on the poor child's leaf, dew on the tip end of her spears. These were her tears.

"Be busy," said Bean Plant, "and you'll have no time for moping."

"A fine how-do-you-do," said Marigold. "By bright smiles I can make all the world happy – except my sister, except my own small sister. How do you think that looks to my suitors? It could cause talk, you know."

Bean Plant said, "All right, all right! What *is* the matter with you anyhow?"

Lily sobbed. Then Lily whispered the sorrow of her heart. "I think," she said, "that the sun is dying."

"The *sun!*" cried the sisters together. "Lily, you dream up the strangest things!"

"The sun does its duty," said Bean Plant.

"The sun shines on beauty," said Marigold.

"What makes you think it would die?" they demanded.

"He told me so," said Lily.

"*The sun doesn't talk!*" shrieked the sisters.

"Maybe not and maybe so," said Lily. "But he is weaker today than yesterday and lower in the sky than a week ago and he doesn't last as long from the east to the west, and this how he said, 'I'm dying, Lily, dying!'" Poor Lily could barely say the words, and she bowed her head and she wept.

The sisters cast uncertain glances to the heavens, and squinted, and measured, and had to agree. Facts were facts, after all: the sun was in decline.

"Well, said the sisters, "So what? So what if the old bald-head wears out? We'll do right well without him."

"But," said Lily, "I love him. He watches me. Oh, Bean Plant, how could I live without him?"

"Lily, don't silly!" said Bean Plant. "The sun is not a somebody, and that's that. Now, you'll excuse me; I've work to do"

And work she did.

Bean Plant began to preserve her abundance. She dried it and packaged it, wrapped it in tough skin of tan and yellow as long as a witch's fingers and hung it on branches above the ground, and these were her pods. "Because," she said, "I don't need the sun after all. I've got my wit and my work and my health. All on my own I am a very important person. It's neither here nor there to me, if the sun should go away." Busy Bean Plant! She stored her goods in bigger barns and waited and wished that her sister wouldn't cry.

Marigold, on the other hand, did nothing.

She checked her brilliant golden blossoms. She looked behind her on the ground and perceived a shadow there and said, "I made that." She took note of the posture of the grass, all brown and all bowed down – to her, as it seemed to her – and she said, "I did that." She touched her cheek and found it warm. And upon all the evidence she concluded that she did herself shine as brightly as the sun, that she was her own burnished light, "and therefore," she said, "tut-tut to the sun. It's time that I were radiant alone and free from competition. I am a very important person." Beautiful Marigold! She patted her hair and waited for all the wood to acknowledge that she was a knockout indeed, and she wished that her sister wouldn't cry.

It cast a shadow on their repute.

But Lily was helpless to stop her tears. For the sun sighed daily, daily weaker than before. And when the sun sagged into bed on a distant horizon, saying, "Good," poor Lily whispered, "Bye." They said "Good-bye" together. Lily knew the truth.

And the deepest truth of all she knew, for the sun was very great, and the sun had told her: all would die in his passing. Not one would be left alive. And as strange as it may sound, Lily accepted her death right and readily, even gladly, thinking that then she would not be lonely when he left.

It was a murderer coming, said the sun, as cold a killer as ever roamed the earth, stark terrible in his deeds.

For this reason alone could Lily make herself say "Bye" when the sun had said "Good."

But when she told the sorrowful news to her sisters, they said, "Tittle-tattle, Lily," completely unmoved, because they said, "No one would kill the one who does her duty as well as I," and "No one would dare destroy such beauty," and they said, "We are very important persons after all."

So Bean Plant labored righteously.

And Marigold primped most blithely.

And Lily wept for what was to come; poor Lily wept alone.

Once more before he left her, the sun spoke a word to Lily. It was a word of the morning and one that he had been speaking all along, but it had never been so important to Lily as it was now, and she had not heard it so clearly before. Perhaps she had been too young before and innocent; perhaps she had not yet hurt enough to *need* to hear it. Truly, it made it no less sad, for the sun was dying indeed. But it stilled her heart in the middle of sadness, and she ceased her tears and she fell silent. The word was "Again."

But Lily was always different from her sisters, untimely, so they thought, and stupid.

For now that she was quiet, they were shrieking.

The Family Fowl that fed from Bean Plant were thinning drastically. And when she asked them what had become of their relatives, her good friends, they rose on the wind crying, "Murderer! Murderer!" and flew south as swiftly as wings could take them. And when

they ceased to come altogether, then poor Bean Plant believed them, and she began to shriek.

The wind that had once dallied with Marigold, dancing round her blossom, now ripped from the north at a terrible speed, frightened by something, snatching the petals from her headdress, stripping her to a most embarrassing bare, careless altogether. “Look out!” screamed Marigold, trying to catch her colors. “Why don’t you stop anymore? Why don’t you care to look at me?” “The murderer,” moaned the wind, “so close behind me! Ah, the Murderer!” And when the wind, in his speed, had broken her stem, then poor marigold believed him, and she began to shriek.

“It’s not fair!” shrieked Bean Plant, gone wonderously skinny and shivering. “I’ve worked all my life, brought bumper crops to everyone, been good, been good, Lord, I’ve been good! Oh, that should count for something. Not I! I shouldn’t have to die!”

“It’s okay,” said Lily, yearning to comfort her sister.

Poor Bean Plant pleaded, “Then I *won’t* have to die?”

“No, you will die,” said Lily, “and I am so sad about that –“ And then she wanted to tell her sister what the sun had said, but Bean Plant shrieked, “Then it’s *not* okay! It’s a *cheat* to someone who has paid her dues-”

But Marigold – with brazen lips – could shriek louder than anyone.

“I don’t want to die!” she screamed, as though this made a difference. “Spinster Willows, let them die! Grandma Elms are old and ought to die. But I, I am a knockout! *I don’t want to die!*”

“It’s okay,” said Lily, unhappy for this sister, too.

“Oh, you!” cried Marigold. “What do *you* know?”

“That the sun said ‘Again,’” said Lily.

“Your sun is vindictive and jealous!” cried Marigold.

Lily whispered, “He’s coming back again—“

But her sisters raised such a loud lamentation that her whisper was lost, and Lily bowed her head, sad, sad, and hating the killer to come, yet very still at the center of her.

And so he came.

The murderer came grey as they said he would – out of the north with terrible robes all around him. And this is how he killed: he killed by kissing.

He kissed Bean Plant in the middle of a shriek and cut it off so that her bones alone stood up above the ground, quivering in death.

Marigold saw and Marigold hid her face in the earth. No matter. He sank into the soil and rose round her roots, froze those, and touched her pretty head, and she was still shrieking “No—“ when he silenced her with a kiss. No, nothing stopped him, and nothing protected the living, for he was complete. His name was winter, dead-white and mighty, hugging the Willows to death, petrifying the waters and rolling the sky in smoke.

Only Lily looked directly at him when he came, hating him, but silently. Only Lily held her peace before he sucked the life from her.

For she had heard the sun to say, “Again.”

Come Easter the following year, there grew a plain white Lily in the field south of the wood. For the sun had come and kissed her corpse, and that was how he said, “I love you.”

Then the flower had burst a white bonnet. That was how *she* said, “I love you, too.”