

Mmm, Good!

Hanging in my office underneath my most recent diploma is a little sign I made that features a two-word Italian phrase: *ancora imparo*. The phrase is credited to the sculptor, painter, architect and poet Michelangelo, who is said to have uttered it in his 87th year. It simply means, “I am still learning.”

And I am, of course, if for no other reason than that *ancora sposato*; that is, I am still married. Every spouse knows that marriage is a perpetual education. For instance, you are always learning new meanings for words you thought you understood. The classic example for husbands is when you are getting ready to go out somewhere with your wife and she asks how she looks, and you – naively and much to your later regret – say, “Fine.”

“Fine” seems like a perfectly good word, a compliment – but, believe me, it isn’t. When a boy is told by his father, “You did a fine job, son,” that boy feels warm all over. When our mothers tell us our just cleaned room looks fine, we heave a sigh of relief. But when a woman asks her husband how she looks, and he replies, “Fine,” trust me, it is the wrong answer.

To help you understand completely, let me play out the rest of the conversation for you:

“Fine?”

“Yeah, fine.”

“Just fine?”

“No, good.”

“Good?”

“Really good?”

“Forget it. Now we are going to be late and it’s *your* fault because *I* have to change my outfit.” If you want to avoid being late and doing penance for the rest of the day, I can suggest some better answers – “How do I look?” “You look ravishing,” “You look gorgeous,” “You look radiant, tantalizing, alluring, far fairer than the sun, the moon and all the stars, a vision of loveliness unparalleled.” See? *Ancora imparo* – I am still learning.

“Fine,” “Good,” – these words just don’t have enough punch, I guess. Somehow, they have come to mean, “just average” or “okay.” For instance, in grading coins, you start with good, then very good, then fine, then very fine, then near mint, mint and finally BU – brilliant uncirculated. Try that the next time your wife asks how she looks. “Honey, you look BU.” On second thought, don’t try

that. Or take the average survey answers to a question like, “How would you rate this widget?” You start with very poor, poor, then good, very good, and finally excellent. See? Good is just average.

I mention all this as a way of trying to explain why it is that a certain part of the scripture we heard this morning tends to be overlooked. We heard it six times, in fact: “And God saw that it was good.” Scholars and preachers alike tend to focus instead on what was created when and how the description as a whole corresponds with modern scientific descriptions of how the world came to be, but few bother to give much consideration to this simple refrain: “And God saw that it was good.”

So let’s try to remedy that today. We won’t worry about what was created when or how the Bible and science can be reconciled. Let’s just focus on this little phrase, “And God saw that it was good.”

One thing is clear – “good” in this case does not mean just “okay,” or “average.” God did not pause at the end of each day of creation to look at what he had made and say, “Okay, I’ll give myself a C, maybe a C+.” The meaning here is closer to what is conveyed when a person smells dinner cooking and says, “Mmm, good!” It is a powerful affirmation, an expression of delight and anticipation. God isn’t blandly satisfied with creation. God is delighted with it. God doesn’t consider creation just “good enough.” God’s response is more along the lines of, “Now *that* is *good*.”

Six times we are reminded of God’s delight with creation. Why? I’m convinced that it is the author’s way of reminding us all of the importance of savoring the world and all that is good in it. As God’s people, we are called to share God’s delight in the world God has made. We are to pay attention and give thanks for its pleasing sights, sounds, flavors, textures and aromas. As odd as it may sound, we have an obligation to enjoy creation.

Theologian Ross Snyder puts it this way: “We were meant to enjoy, to delight, to celebrate. To be fascinated by presence, mystery, by wonder, amazement, and the surge of realization. To be so sensitive to patterns of beauty that they interest us and dwell in us from that time on. Instead of continuing to rush about, we are to take it in, appreciate it; to sense what it all means. . . . There are evils in the world which must be fought and problems which must be worked on. And they must not be ignored. But if our attention is constantly only upon them ... we become eroded, rigid, drained of warmth, dehumanized.”

Think of it this way. We hear police and sociologists talk about gateway drugs – the common, less addictive, and sometimes even legal substances that people start using, but which turn out to be only the starting point for the eventual use of and addiction to more serious drugs. The failure to delight in God’s creation is a kind of spiritual “gateway drug.” It is the first step toward much more serious

forms of spiritual alienation.

We begin by neglecting the wonders around us, but we may end up despising them, and – by intention or carelessness – destroying them. Yes, we are called to care for creation, to have dominion, to till and to keep, but before all of this comes delight – we have to remember to notice and enjoy. “And God saw that it was good.” We need to see it, too.

Sometimes a dramatic experience helps reorient us. Poet Mary Oliver shares how a near-death experience opened her eyes, in a poem she called simply the *Alligator Poem*.

I knelt down
at the edge of the water
and if the white birds standing
in the tops of the trees whistled any warning
I didn't understand,
I drank up to the very moment it came
crashing toward me,
it's tail flailing
like a bundle of swords,
slashing the grass,
and the inside of its cradle-shaped mouth
gaping,
and rimed with teeth –
and that's how I almost died
of foolishness
in beautiful Florida.
But I didn't.
I leaped aside, and fell,
and it streamed past me, crushing everything in its path
as it swept down to the water
and threw itself in,
and, in the end,
this isn't a poem about foolishness
but about how I rose from the ground
and saw the world as if for the second time,
the way it really is.
The water, that circle of shattered glass,
healed itself with a slow whisper
and lay back

with the back-lit light of polished steel,
and the birds, in the endless waterfalls of the trees,
shook open the snowy pleats of their wings, and drifted away,
while, for a keepsake, and to steady myself,
I reached out,
I picked the wild flowers from the grass around me –
blue stars
and blood-red trumpets
on long green stems –
for hours in my trembling hands they glittered
like fire.”

Someone else has written, “If the earth were only a few feet in diameter, floating a few feet above a field somewhere, people would come from everywhere to marvel at it. People would walk around it, marveling at its big pools of water, and the water flowing between the pools. People would marvel at the bumps on it, and the holes in it, and they would marvel at the very thin layer of gas surrounding it and the water suspended in the gas. People would marvel at all the creatures in the water. The people would declare it as sacred because it was the only one, and they would protect it so that it would not be hurt. The ball would be the greatest wonder known, and people would come to pray to it, to be healed, to gain knowledge, to know beauty and to wonder how it could be. People would love it, and defend it with their lives because they would somehow know that their lives, their own roundness, could be nothing without it – if the earth were only a few feet in diameter.”

We live in a world of wonders, with great responsibilities, but our first responsibility is to be awake, to notice, to see what God sees – “And God saw that it was good.” The sunrise, the smell of a campfire, the call of a loon on a northern lake, new fallen snow, the aroma of coffee brewing, a first kiss, the flutter of leaves descending to earth, the graceful stride of a running horse, blossoms unfolding, the dance of soap bubbles carried by a breeze, the rumble of distant thunder, the scratch of Grandpa’s unshaven cheek, the angle of light on a winter’s afternoon.

All these gifts of God are ours, to stir up delight and create gratitude, so that we might be drawn to their Creator and ours. Faith begins in delight and is sustained by gratitude. So let us, day by day, remember to see and savor and give thanks to God for all that is good in the world God has made.

Amen.

