

*Have you ever tried to enter the long black branches of other lives --
tried to imagine what the crisp fringes, full of honey, hanging
from the branches of the young locust trees, in early morning, feel like?*

Do you think this world was only an entertainment for you?

*Never to enter the sea and notice how the water divides
with perfect courtesy, to let you in!
Never to lie down on the grass, as though you were the grass!
Never to leap to the air as you open your wings over the dark acorn of your heart!*

*No wonder we hear, in your mournful voice, the complaint
that something is missing from your life!*

This is the beginning of a poem by Mary Oliver. It was one of the first things I was asked to read when I was trained to be a spiritual director, and these opening lines remind me of the gifts I experience at St. Andrew's.

What I love most about St. Andrew's is the people. I've experienced, over and over again, that when I take the time to listen, people's experiences with the divine are amazing. I see this time and again -- at the community cafe, at coffee hour, during Compassionate life, in Lectio Divina, or during theological reflection at EfM. We all have untold depths that can only be appreciated when we slow down and take the time to listen. I treasure how St. Andrew's opens up spaces of sharing that allow for deep listening; life seems a little less meaningful and a little less vibrant without them.

The poem also reminds me that being witnesses to each other's lives is not only full of beauty, but it is also a privilege. I always imagine how those long black branches of other's lives might become twisted or broken if not entered into with love and care. Right now, I am feeling that sense of beauty and privilege most deeply in the youth Confirmation class. I feel privileged to listen to the youth as they think, question, and wonder. I grow when someone brings up a perspective that I had not thought of before. I enjoy moments of silliness and remembering that it is good to have fun, and that everything doesn't have to be deep and meaningful ALL THE TIME. I hope that we are creating a space to explore our beliefs without judgement and without pressure.

The curriculum we use is called Confirm not Conform, and it encourages us to explore our beliefs so we can act from our beliefs rather than from outside pressures. Some youth who have been through the program have said that it was empowering to be encouraged to be themselves, especially when that was not necessarily what they were experiencing in other places. And for me, that is St. Andrew's and church at it's best, when we support each other in being the people that God created us to be.