

One New Book for the Preacher

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Edith Pearlman, *Honeydew* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2015). 275 pages.

Good preachers constantly search for good stories. Not pre-processed, inspirational “sermon illustrations,” but true-to-life stories that put contemporary flesh on the bones of ancient scripture. We cull stories from the news and from other preachers’ sermons; we jot down stories from our friends and sometimes accidentally overhear them in the coffee shop; we dig into our own past and pay attention to our present and regretfully discard great stories that seem to embarrass our children; we scour the National Public Radio archives.

But one often neglected source of sermon stories is, well, stories—literary short stories. I have been encouraged to use such stories in my preaching by Dr. Mike Graves, who teaches on the sermon and short stories at St. Paul Seminary in Kansas City. Dr. Graves’ recent book, *The Story of Narrative Preaching: Story and Exposition: A Narrative*, presents some of the literary and theological material from his class. The book encourages preachers to attend to both the expository and narrative elements of their sermons and to consider literary short stories as a key resource of rich narrative material.

Rather than review a book *about* short stories, however, I want to share a book *of* short stories: Edith Pearlman’s 2015 story collection, *Honeydew*. The title is a reference to manna—a substance that the main character of the title story claims was the sweet tasting excrement of a particular desert-dwelling insect (page 264). Like manna, Pearlman’s stories are nourishing and sweet, earthy and a bit mysterious. The stories in *Honeydew* are full of wilderness moments and grace, of people searching and suffering and finding and losing. They are the kind of stories that can help us see ancient scripture from fresh perspectives.

In “Deliverance,” we meet Mimi, a stylish middle-aged woman who applies for a job at the local soup kitchen for women and children called the Ladle. There are hints of Samuel’s selection and anointing of David (1 Samuel 16) when the staff of the soup kitchen interview Mimi. Her “bewitchingly chic” appearance is somewhat off-putting, but the staff have seen the soup kitchen guests “rummage through a pile of donated rags, select a few, and with those few convert themselves into a dead ringer for a CEO or, if you want to talk really elegant, a high-priced call girl” (162). Mimi beats out two other candidates who would seem, on the surface, to be much more qualified for the job.

Mimi turns out to be a great asset to the organization. Reminiscent of Jesus feeding the 5,000, she is able to take “a meager amount of cod donated by a fish market half an hour before it turned and make it the basis for an abundant chowder” (165). Mimi’s personal concern for and interaction with the kitchen guests parallel Jesus’ engagement with the poor and outcast of his day. She has some of the women guests stay late one afternoon to help her with a Lego-sorting project. As a reward for their labors, she takes them out for pizza—and a bottle of wine. She insists that Donna,

the manager, does not need to reimburse her for the wine, to which Donna responds, “It was grape juice; I have it on the best authority” (166).

With these earlier hints of Mimi as a Christ figure, the story continues into an odd and beautiful rendition of the Gerasene demoniac—particularly the version in Matthew 8:28-32 where *two* demon possessed men are healed. In Pearlman’s version of the story, the possessed men are instead women, Miss Valentine and O-Kay, who frequent the Ladle. The women hear voices; they are delusional and sometimes violent. Mimi talks with the women frequently and finally reports to Donna that the two women are possessed: “Miss Valentine and O-Kay can’t rid themselves of their demons, not without help” (167). Donna tells her that the two women don’t need an exorcism; they just need to go back on their medications. But Mimi doesn’t listen. In the final scene, Donna watches through a window as Mimi, Miss Valentine, and O-Kay sit together around a table, a cage containing the Ladle’s two gerbils sitting in the middle of the group. Mimi eventually lets the gerbils out of the cage, and Donna is afraid they will run into the pantry and ruin the food. Instead the rodents run out of the building—through the door that Mimi left propped open—and “Pell-mell, with all the willfulness of the crazed, they ran up the cement stairs and into the lake”—which is actually a large puddle created by the incessant rain (p. 172). Miss Valentine and O-Kay are more calm than Donna has ever seen them, and Mimi assures Donna that the gerbils will be replaced before the guests arrive for the next day’s meal.

Another beautiful story with echoes of biblical texts is the opening piece “Tenderfoot.” The Tenderfoot pedicure parlor fronts Main Street, with a large plate-glass window that allows people to see the foot washing rituals that are described in distinctly religious language. Paige attracts many clients “who appreciated that a footbath administered by a discreet attendant squatting on a stool could become a kind of secular confessional” (p. 4). And Paige’s new neighbor Bobby “liked to see the customers relax on the chair, as if this quasi-biblical experience transported them to some soapy heaven; as if, briefly dead, they could call their sins forgiven” (p. 5). We are even told that, in the work she did, Paige “ministered directly to people” (p. 6).

It is perhaps this ministry, this confessional element, that Bobby, who has recently separated from his wife, is seeking when he makes an appointment for his pedicure. The scene of Bobby’s footwashing brings to mind Jesus washing the disciples’ feet: first Bobby removed his shoes, then Paige brought him a goblet of wine. “Then she fetched the tub of water. Cradling his ankles in one arm, she bent back the foot ledge of his chair and moved the tub a little and slid his feet into the warm liquid” (p. 8). The pedicure parlor becomes a sanctuary where Bobby confesses and is cleansed, even as Paige, with “a thick towel on her lap,” absorbs his sorrow and guilt (p. 8).

While “Tenderfoot” portrays a location of spiritual healing, the second story in Pearlman’s collection, “Dream Children,” deals with questions of physical healing. Willa, a young woman from an unnamed island country, has come to New York to serve as a nanny for Jack and Sylvie who have four boys. In a drawer in her room, Willa discovers three old drawings done by Jack; they are of grotesque baby figures. The youngest of the four children develops a persistent fever, and the three adults take turns each night caring for the infant.

One night, when it is Willa’s turn to care for the child, she gives him a bottle of tea made from crushed nuts—a “potion” from her island aunt. Finally, the baby’s fever

breaks. When Willa goes into the kitchen to tell Jack the good news, she discovers him creating another drawing, “only a head this time, pointed ears and one eye missing and an open mouth, lipless” (p. 24). He explains that his drawings are amulets, and he watches as she pours the remaining tea down the drain. The questions about healing raised in this story resonate with many stories of Jesus’ healings as well: What is the relationship between the healer and the healed? Does the healing have a biological cause, is it supernatural, or is it merely coincidental? How do we cope when our loved ones are ill?

Another story, “Wait and See,” raises significant theological questions about truth—and how much of it we really want to see. The main character Lyle has hyperchromaticity, which means he can see more colors than other people. As Lyle grows up with this condition, he increasingly feels isolated by his vision. At one point he is able to see the cancer under the skin of a woman he has a sexual relationship with. She dies not long after. Many people tell Lyle that he has a gift, but he experiences his heightened vision as a burden. And so Lyle’s stepfather, an optometrist, develops special glasses that Lyle can wear to normalize his vision. At the end of the story, Lyle takes off his glasses and then puts them back on, deciding that his vision without or with the glasses is equally true: “Truth had nothing to do with the witness of the eyes. What he saw now was simply what other people saw. He chose their limited vision; he meant to live in this world as an ordinary man. He would not remove his glasses again” (p. 205).

Beyond “Deliverance,” “Tenderfoot,” “Dream Children,” and “Wait and See,” many other stories in this collection are also preachable. For this Lenten season, the title story “Honeydew” connects to themes of wilderness and directly references the Israelites’ desert wanderings. “Blessed Harry” and “Descent of Happiness” explore ideas about creation, fall, and the topic of the speech Myron Flaxbaum is asked to give in “Blessed Harry”—“The Mystery of Life and Death” (p. 70). “Fishwater” pairs well with the story of Abraham, assigned this year for the Second Sunday of Lent; it introduces us to Franz, a Holocaust survivor well acquainted with barrenness, sacrifice, and promise. “Cul-de-Sac” offers us an outcast woman (to set next to the woman at the well) in addition to a chaotic and congenial meal scene complete with a spilled wine glass.

While many stories in this collection could become effective sermon material, the value of *Honeydew* for the preacher goes far beyond providing usable stories. Pearlman presents us with beautifully human characters, realistically complex relationships, and language that both delights and communicates truth. In each story we witness a master writer putting flesh on the bones of emotion and idea. In the end, even if you never use any of Pearlman’s stories in a sermon, reading this book just might make you a better preacher.