

## Proper 18 Year A

**“For the night is far gone and the day is near.”**

This Friday morning I stopped by the church office early... and in the garden just outside the office door was the largest swallowtail butterfly I've ever seen... It was checking out Creighton's watermelons... Creighton, for those of you who don't know him, is our homeless gentleman farmer whose life work, at least for this summer, is caring for the nurture of what has become a pretty sporty crop of watermelons... And then the butterfly floated upward to feed on the milkweed... It was mysterious, graceful, beautiful in the growing morning light... intricate patterns of gold and black on its wings... earnest and resolute in its immediate purpose... bearing some ancient knowing beneath those immaculate wings.... Earnest and resolute as if the work mattered beyond all questions.... resolute, as if the universe depended on it.

One of our young confirmands; confirmands being our candidates who will have their Baptisms confirmed by the bishop next week... one asked me a poignant question at our retreat yesterday... All of the confirmands had been fairly quiet during their instruction... Our instruction begins at the Baptismal font and then we physically make our way toward the altar during the morning until we conclude with the Eucharist there surrounding God's table... the closer we came to the altar the more the questions began to emerge.... The questions were insightful: If Adam and Eve were kicked out of the garden, and their children married as it says in the bible... where did their wives come from? Good question. If the gospels call us to take care of our neighbor, what do we do about bad people? If God loves everyone, why are there poor people? If there is a Holy Spirit, then are there evil spirits? And then finally, the young girl's question: Why do we die?

And these of course are questions that have bedeviled theologians since time immemorial... questions that keep theologians off the streets at night.... So after a lot of theologizing on my part, I had to give the answer that is really the only answer to such questions... I don't know... Why do we die, she asked with all sincerity, almost painfully... and that brings me back to the butterfly and today's gospel.

I looked up the lifecycle of the butterfly... and the average lifespan of 7500 species of butterflies is only about two weeks... and yet the butterfly lives with singular, dare I say enlightened purpose... pure consciousness... and really in the vast sweep of eternity our life-spans are not much longer....

We live only a millisecond when we look at the grand scheme of things.... The Psalmist laments: Man has only a short time to live... he flourishes like a flower and then is cut down... he withers like the grass... and if that is true... and it is... then the question becomes: How then shall we live.... Indeed Matthew in his gospel is not concerned with death, nor is he concerned with life after death... The specter of death haunts this gospel, as Jesus three times foretells his death in Jerusalem, but the energy of this gospel, as in the other gospels, is not concerned with the possibility of a life after our physical deaths, contrary to the theology of popular Christianity.... Matthew is concerned not with the question of why do we die... but with the question of how shall we live today... here... and now.... How do we live into the mystery and beauty of creation in the short time we have on earth.... How do we live in this millisecond of eternity with meaning and purpose... That is the vision Matthew wishes to articulate... That is the vision that he sees in the life and ministry of Jesus... not a supernatural vision of the hereafter, but a vision of the here and now.... A vision of a full life of enlightened meaning and purpose.

Our reading for today is an excerpt from Jesus' sermon on the mount; more of a teaching than a sermon.... But in this excerpt is the core of Jesus' teaching, and that teaching has everything to do with how we live together... and at the core is the premise that what we bind or loose on this earth is bound or loosed in heaven.... We say that every Sunday in the prayer that Jesus taught us... Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven... In other words... a yes in earth is a yes in heaven... and a no in earth is a no in heaven.... And when we collaborate (when two or three are gathered Mathew says) when we collaborate for the greater good... the illusory veil between heaven and earth is breeched; heaven and earth one reality, one time, one place... that when paying attention in enlightened community and acting for the good of the whole then God is set loose.... So brothers and sisters, don't look to the hereafter for meaning and resolution... Look to your lives in this world... your lives given for the sake of your neighbor.... In our reading today we are taught to reconcile with one another, call each other to account... to put behind us our differences engendered by envy and greed... reconcile with each other... or not... But in any case, move on! Move on because life is short and we have important work to do... important work as if the universe depends upon it.... Because what we do... in the yeses and nos of our lives, the created order is shaped and transformed... because in what we do God is among us... and God seeks only to draw the world to Godself in love.... To follow Christ is to be the means of Gods

ends of love... Love that would bear kindness and justice and peace and nonviolence to a world that is hindered in its becoming by evil.

I told our confirmands yesterday that this life of faith that we share is not for the faint of heart... and I tell you today... Think hard about giving yourself to this life... this life of self-giving and sacrifice... this life in which the good of our neighbor is what we live for.... This life is counter-cultural... the road less travelled by, if you will... It requires rigorous honesty... It requires forgiveness (of others and of ourselves) It requires deep empathy.. and perhaps most of all it requires maturity.... Living into the wisdom and the perspective that life experience brings if one is but paying attention along the way... That is what prayer is: paying attention along the way... If you think the life of faith is comfortable... if you think the life of faith is easy, then think again.... But I will tell you this: The life of faith is real.... The life of faith changes things... the life of faith bears heaven... heaven in earth... and it brings gratitude and courage and joy that are not fleeting, but a very way of life.

Why is there death, she asked? I don't know... and I don't know about the hereafter, though I do believe God will forever draw us to Godself... that nothing created in the mind and heart of God is ever lost... what that will be I can't say.... But the sages come before us offer a witness to a sure and certain hope... that what we bind and loose here on earth is heaven in its becoming... that in every act of mercy, and kindness and compassion... in our honest standing against injustice and evil, in our improvisation of love here and now, heaven is engendered in the lives of others and in our own lives... here and now.... I don't know about y'all but I am grateful for that... grateful for this millisecond I have on this earth to be about the mystery, beauty and purpose of the life force... the life force that we name "God".... Dear people of God, it is for us to be earnest and resolute in the life of faith... It is for us to say yes to this high call... yes to this ancient knowing... to say yes as if the universe depended upon it... because it does... It truly does.