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“Colonies on Earth”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20; Luke 9:51-62; Galatians 5:1, 13-25

In the book of John, Nicodemus, under the cover of darkness, asks Jesus,

“What must one do in order ‘to see’ the Kingdom of God?”

To which Jesus replies, “Unless a person is born again, or actually

‘born from above,’ ἀνωθεν (*anóthen*), in the Greek meaning *from above*,

one cannot expect to see the Kingdom of God (John 3:3).

Nevertheless, I am finding that as the grandmother of a two year old,

I am learning to see the Kingdom of God from the ground up

and am being born again, from below, if that is even possible.

Take ants, for instance. Our grandson is obsessed with ants.

He will stop whatever he is doing and drop to the ground on his stomach

to observe a lone ant scuttle across a flagstone to the safety of a crevasse.

And when he began the Adamic task of giving names to every living creature,

he voiced the word “ant” early on, giving it two syllables, in good southern style.

And he learned to differentiate “ant” from “fire ant,” giving that four syllables

and avoiding that species at all cost.

Because he is so enamored, we took him to the Museum of Life and Science

to see the ant colony exhibit, housed there behind a panel of glass.

Harvester ants could be seen from above hauling bits and pieces

of fruit, seeds, and fresh vegetation into the intricate tunnels

of their habitat down below.

Our grandson pressed his nose to the glass to observe the columns of ants

ascending and descending through the maze of earthen tunnels:

some collecting the food, some feeding the young,

some taking out the garbage, some defending the colony up top,

and some caring for the queen down beneath.

What I found out through my grandson's interest is that some species of ants

can develop huge colonies with highly specified divisions

of labor within each colony.

And, get this: *next to human beings, ants can form*

some of the largest and most complex animal societies on earth!

By what great power, I wondered, does an ant society carry on *its* tasks

in order to survive as a colony, as a single body of many pieces,

as an organic whole with a collective intelligence arising

from a plethora of possible choices?

By what great power do ants lay down chemical markers at a fork in the path

to direct brother and sister ants towards the most fruitful direction?

By what great power do the following ants reinforce or contradict this sign

so the traffic on the network adjusts nimbly as conditions change?
By what great power are signals laid down if invaders are approaching
to direct more workers to the battlefield?

(Nathanael Johnson. *Unseen City*, "Ant," p. 153)

And by what great power does the second most complex colony on earth
bear resemblance and witness to that human colony, the Church,
a colony of heaven planted on earth which is called to be
a visible exhibition of the Kingdom of God for the world?

(PC(USA) *Book of Order*, F-1.0304, "The Great Ends of the Church")

In his first-century letter to the churches in the Roman province of Galatia,
the Apostle Paul is addressing a colony of Christians
founded on his first missionary journey there, who seem to be struggling
against forces from without and forces from within

which threaten to invade and destroy their nascent colony.

Externally, a different gospel is turning heads and creating factions
within the colony: a gospel based upon Jewish practices
of law, circumcision, and justification by works, or works righteousness.

To this external threat, Paul encourages them to "stand firm" and not submit once
more to the yoke of slavery to the law.

He reminds them that *freedom* is the hallmark of their new identity in Christ.

They are no longer Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free;

they are all now children of God *through faith*, baptized and clothed in Christ,
and thereby, fully belonging to Christ (Galatians 3:26-29).

However, their freedom *from* slavery to sin and death involves a tension:

their freedom *from* now is yoked to their freedom *for* serving one another,
and their freedom *for* loving their neighbors as they love themselves.

Scottish New Testament Scholar, Richard Bauckham, notes that this is not

just a first-century tension; it is also a contemporary tension
between the compatibility of freedom and community,

“between the human need to be independent and the human need to belong.”

(Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in the Contemporary World*.

“Freedom and Belonging,” p. 70)

This tension, Bauckham notes, has exacerbated in our day, to the extent

that it now displays as hyper-individualism and the decline of social obligation.

By what great power does the colony of heaven on earth

resist the economic factors that give strong advantage to individual freedom
and apply ourselves to the flourishing of the common good?

By what great power does the Church resist freedom as a zero-sum game,

more for me and less for you, and realize that the more freedom and
dignity we afford each other, the more we all have?

Internally, a second threat, similar to the first, is endangering

the life of the first-century colony of Christ:

the Galatians are using their new-found freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence,
for self-centered living as opposed to God-centered living.

“The flesh” is Paul’s way of talking about the realm of self-centered living,

which can totally wreck a community, and he lists those manifestations.

I don't want to beat you up with a morality check-list of rights and wrongs,
but I do want you to think back to that harvester ant colony and wonder
what would happen:
if the food gatherers up top wandered off for a little vacation;
if the underground granary attendants indulged in a three-day bender;
if the caretakers of the young neglected their charges
because of jealousy and anger;
if the defenders of the mound at the entrance began back-biting
and devouring one another;
if the attendants to the queen engaged in their own little entanglements?
How would those acts of self-indulgence affect the well-being of that ant community?

By what great power do our human colonies realize that freedom is,
at its core, *relational*, and that freedom in Christ is *for the common good*?

"This is only possible," Bauckham says, "when... hyper-individualistic people
are able to transcend their supposedly autonomous, self-sufficient,
wholly self-determining selves
and find their true selves in relation to the truly determinative reality (God)
that graciously gives them selves that subsist
in freedom and relationships" (Bauckham, p. 78).

As I understand Paul, just as forces from without and forces from within
can threaten the Church, likewise God in Christ has empowered
the colony of heaven on earth with strength from without and strength from within
to counter those threats.

First, from without, through *the great power of the Holy Spirit*

which has gifted believers since that windy Pentecost event

with the relation-enhancing fruits of the Spirit:

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

These gifts of the Spirit, poured out upon us all, sealed in us at baptism,

help us to keep from doing only what we want and free and enable us to *love*,

and to live out that *love* in relation to others, working for their well-being.

These gifts emanate from our spiritual center the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit,

enabling us to relate to others and interact with others in ways of love, joy,

peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

The Way that Jesus lived and moved and had his being

has been implanted into the very heart of our own hearts.

And secondly, from within, God has gifted us with *the great power of the saints*,

those among us who possess these spiritual gifts, embody these gifts,

and use these spiritual gifts for the building up, the guidance,

the nurture, and the protection of the whole people of God.

This was made clear to me recently as we were putting together

the Service of Witness to the Resurrection for Walter Shackelford,

a cradle to grave saint of First Presbyterian Church, who publically declared

to his dying day that this church was the number one love of his life.

When I would visit Walter in his room at the Pavilion at Croasdaile,

he would not necessarily remember who I was,

but when I would tell him that I was a pastor at First Presbyterian Church,

he always would say, "Hey, that's my church, too!"

I want to follow the path marked out by this extraordinary photographer and peacemaker who used his gifts of the spirit to love the church and witness to the world. I want to follow Walter's witness.

Without naming names, I want to follow the path marked out by those of you who have chosen to foster, adopt, commit to, covenant with, marry, and build non-biological families, just as Christ has adopted us into the non-biological family of God and made us brothers and sisters of the promise through baptism.

I want to follow your witness that expands my limited concept of family.

I want to follow the path marked out by those of you who might be estranged or divorced from your spouse, but who both still come to church, even if you sit miles apart, to support your children and to contribute to the life of the body.

It's so brave that you can do that, so admirable. You might not be modeling forgiveness yet, but you are exemplars of mutual forbearance which hints at the possibility of forgiveness at some future point.

I want to follow your spiritual giftedness.

I want to follow the path marked out by those of you who have experienced great hurt or misunderstanding from another member or two of the church, and yet who still come together to seek sanctuary in this place, Sunday after Sunday, to surrender your unsettledness to God, praying in one voice, *thy will be done*.

I admire the intestinal fortitude and courage it takes to pray angrily towards
reconciliation, and then to wait and see together when that might occur.

And, I want to follow the path marked out by those of you
who are positive and affirming, never giving up hope
in our broken and fearful world.

Theologian Ian Bradley says, "We need to recover that almost unconscious
vision of the Church as a community of benediction (good words)...
proclaiming the glory of God in his created order.

In this understanding, churches and Christian communities, representing
the body of Christ, are indeed colonies of heaven speaking well of things,
affirming goodness and showering blessings on a world where there
is so much putting down and reductionism...

Here is a real counter-cultural task for Christians—to celebrate and bless
rather than to criticize and put down."

(Bradley, Ian. *Colonies of Heaven*, p. 85-86)

I want to follow your positive witness that trusts in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life.

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free, says the familiar Shaker hymn.

Freedom from and *freedom for* is the hallmark of our identity in Christ.

Let us use our gifts of the Spirit in relational ways,
to love and serve one another. Amen.