

Fear of Snakes

March 21, 2021

Maybe it's because of the Older Testament scripture lesson we heard last week, or maybe it's because of the mythology of St. Patrick driving the snakes out of Ireland, but snakes have been on my mind a lot this week. One of my colleagues tells the great story of doing a pet blessing with his congregation in a New York City park. As you can imagine, all sorts of pets were part of the celebration. People actually brought out their goldfish bowls and parakeets in cages. Folks marveled at how one could possibly keep a Great Dane in the city. There were dozens upon dozens of itty-bitty dogs. And, of course, someone brought a giant snake.

What kind of snake changes every time my colleague tells the story, but he swears it was a really, really big snake. Now, he's always one for getting attention and trying to push boundaries, so my colleague had the snake's person drape it across his shoulders, and he walked around the blessing as people gathered, greeting them, and trying to get them to understand that the snake was not to be feared. As if God were in on the boundary pushing, my colleague did end up getting bit that day...not by the snake, but by a Pomeranian. Oh, how he loves to tell this story, and use it as a lesson to remind us that, all too often, we're afraid of the wrong things.

A VERY cursory look at Google tells me that fewer than 5 people die in the U.S. each year from snake bites, but more than 50 people die from dog bites. The Rev. Mike Piazza says:

“Any of our fears can make us behave in silly and unreasonable ways. Fear can keep us standing on sofas and avoiding Pomeranian dogs. Even our common fears, like snakes, often are unreasonable and unfounded. Most things we worry about never happen, and most things we fear never hurt us. Still, they can have a profound impact. The worry usually has a worse effect on us than that which we worry about ever could. Our fear can limit us much more than the thing of which we are afraid.”

As we round the corner on this season of Lent, I'd like to invite you into assessing your fears, or as Rev. Mike Piazza asks, “What is the snake in your garden?” As Jon pointed out last week, when we read of the Garden of Eden, the text really never says that the snake is evil or to be feared, this is mere interpretation, read into the text over the centuries, to the point that most of us assume it is based in fact. And so, I'd like to suggest the image that the “snake in your garden” is the thing that you've been trained to fear, the thing that, in reality, isn't all that fearsome. In fact, it may be a catalyst into the next chapter of your story. Think about it – staying in your garden with the snake you fear isn't necessarily the recipe for an idyllic life either.

In the Older Testament scripture from the book of the Prophet Jeremiah which Jammie read, we heard:

“I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”

Love of God, neighbor, and self has been written on your hearts. Not the stony, ossified knowledge of laws, but the fleshy, messy, palpating love that will get you out of bed to run to a friend's bedside at three in the morning. Not the fearful, limiting knowledge that motivates staying in line or else, but the love that risks because of the inherent worth of the other.

This week, we received several inquiries from people who are looking for a new church home. (I've come to notice that this often happens when the Catholic church behaves badly.) If you haven't been paying attention, earlier this week, it was reported that Pope Francis had reiterated that the Roman Catholic church could not and would not bless same-sex unions. In response to this declaration, Episcopal Bishop Matthew Gunter pointed out that this is consistent with what the Catholic Church has taught, and it is clear and coherent, BUT:

“The dark shadow of that teaching is that many are consigned to lives of anguish, despair, and even death – at their own hands or those of others. Whether the pope or anyone else wants to admit it, there is real collateral damage in maintaining that teaching. It calls LGBT persons not to being a living sacrifice for the sake of their souls, but to a sacrifice of death for the sake of others holding onto a way of understanding scripture and theology.”

In our “Opening Our Hearts” Lenten series this last week, Julie Harder brilliantly walked us through how the concept of sacrifice developed and changed as the Old Testament was developed. By tracing the various sources of biblical writings and the agendas and priorities of the writers, she made the strong case for the idea that sacrifice is A theology of the Hebrew Bible, but not THE theology of the Hebrew Bible, and then we teased that idea forward to talk about how that dynamic impacts Christian ideas of sacrifice and atonement. The full video of the session is available from the church office if you're interested in it, but the general idea is that a strong case can be made for understanding God as wholly merciful, not requiring Jesus as a bloody sacrifice.

All of this is my long-winded way of coming around to say that it is completely faithful to give up the spirituality of sacrifice, the spirituality that somehow has told us that God will be appeased by our self-denial and self-depreciation. It is completely faithful to give up a theology that doesn't draw people into abundant life and love of God, neighbor, and self. It also vividly demonstrates that the scriptures do not speak with one voice.

Friends, I cannot stress this strongly enough: holding rigidly to a practice that is death dealing purely for the sake of consistency is not only bad theology, it is, in itself, sinful. God has written God's law on our hearts, not a law of rigidity, but a law of compassion and mercy. Jesus' own witness values mercy over sacrifice. Again, to quote Episcopal Bishop Gunter:

“Perhaps the only sacrifice that ultimately matters...is the cross-bearing, self-denying sacrifice of ever deepening mercy, compassion, and love which fulfils the law.”

Like my colleague who carried the snake around the pet blessing only to be bit by the Pomeranian, this is an example of the Catholic church being afraid of the wrong thing. They're focused on a couple of scripture verses taken out of context and are forgetting the dominant scriptural witness of the God of love and compassion and grace and relationship. Along with the passage in which the Prophet Jeremiah tells us that God will write God's law on our hearts, in

our Gospel today, we read of Jesus telling his followers, “Truly, truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” Sometimes, we have to let things go. Sometimes the most faithful thing to do is to let things die, to let them wither and fade, be it our fears or our long held but no longer healthy beliefs or practices.

This brings us back to the image of fear of snakes. Rev. Mike Piazza points out:

“Snakes are an important part of the ecological balance. Destroy them and soon, the rodent population begins to take over, bringing disease. Snakes are often colorful, beautiful, and graceful, and, for the most part, harmless creatures. Most of us know that; at least, we’ve read it somewhere. The problem is it doesn’t change how we feel about snakes. As with most of our prejudices, there is one part of our mind that acknowledges our feelings are unreasonable, and yet another part clings to those feelings, sometimes with renewed tenacity.”

At the core of the season of Lent is the practice of repentance and conversion, the seeking of a changed way of life. Our scriptures today invite us to let go – let go of our fears – perhaps fears of death or the other shoe falling or losing control or being alone or truly being known, to let go of the beliefs that we’ve been carrying around that no longer serve our flourishing.

For each one of us, what we need to allow to fall to the earth and die is different. I think of a friend of mine who, years ago, was in a loveless, miserable marriage. The two of them fought constantly and brought out the worst in each other. They had done therapy both individually and as a couple. They had read the self-help books. Perhaps most importantly, they wanted very different things out of life. When I asked him why they were still together even though they both were really and truly miserable and had been for years, he said that they had a lot of money, and he was afraid of losing half of it. We were in our thirties at the time, and so I pointed out that he could reasonably expect to live another 40 to 50 years and asked him if he thought that being miserable for four or five decades was worth whatever was in his bank account.

Now, I’m not telling you all to run out and get divorced, but I will tell you that this couple did split. I’m still in contact with both of them, and they’re both living much healthier lives now that they’re not together. Sometimes, our fears hold us back from living our healthiest lives. Sometimes, our deeply held beliefs cease to serve the law of love and compassion and healing and grace that God has written on our hearts.

And so, my prayer for all of us this week is that we’ll all have the grace, and the courage, to recognize that the snake in the grass that we have spent so much energy protecting ourselves from might just be a much better pet than a fluffy puppy. May we let our fears and our deadening ideas fall to the earth and die, in order that God can turn them into the seeds of new life.

May it be so. Amen.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
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