

## If Only Bees Could Talk

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As it turns out, bees can and do talk, but of course, they don't speak "human." A honeybee tells what she knows through her body, via dance moves -- the most popular being the waggle dance. With her figure-8 waggle rumba, a bee conveys the direction and distance to newly discovered nectar to others. Like humans, bees can communicate thousands of messages, but bees are stuck on only one topic: the location of nectar with respect to the hive! They do not reminisce about a favorite flower, share worries about the fate of the younger bee generations, or ponder what humans might do better as earthlings. Or at least, scientists don't think so! As it turns out, we -- as human beings called by God to tend Earth's garden -- we are the ones who need to figure out what bees might be saying. Following Sue Monk Kidd's advice -- her words found on the front of the bulletin -- we are invited to use our mystical sight to look deeply into the mystery behind and within the beauty of our bee friends. It is a mystery that shines brightly.

Today, in fact, is first day of *Creation Season*. Francis of Assisi, the Italian saint who stands guard over our Binkley courtyard, bids us to look closer at the gifts of brother sun and sister moon; brothers wind and air, and sister water; brother bear and sister wolf; brother dragonfly and sister bee. One way to hear what the Divine speaking through nature is by taking what is called "a parable walk." Walking with my senses awake, open, I smell and feel the blessing of a magnolia blossom, and hear the rising praise of the cicada in the afternoon sun. Jesus took such parable walks. Pointing to a field of lilies one day, Jesus noted that lilies don't worry, toiling day after day making clothes, because they are already wonderfully adorned (Mt. 6:28).

As I meditate on sister bee, I cannot help but be awed again and again by her intelligence, her energy, her short life given on behalf of the well-being of her companions, her devotion to her community called a

“hive.” The buzz of her wings embodies her lifelong passion for that hive: as a young bee, she tends baby bees with pollen and honey, later she joins others to keep the hive at an optimal temperature of 94 degrees F, by either flapping her wings to cool the colony, or by wiggling her body to warm it. She might then go out on a mission to get water for the hive. Finally, we find her, now a mature bee, foraging in the world for nectar and pollen. On just one trip out of the hive, she will visit between 50 and 1,000 flowers. But despite all of this hard work, her production seems scant. Over a lifetime of nectar gathering, she will only produce about 1/12 th a teaspoon of honey.

Just a few more bee facts that stagger one’s imagination: in order to make one pound of honey, nearly 800 bees will fly over 55,000 miles and visit about 2 million flowers. And honey has been revered through the ages for good reason; it is the only food that includes all of the ingredients necessary to sustain life. No wonder John the Baptist survived in the wilderness, eating grasshoppers and sipping wild honey. And fresh honey is good stuff, I hear. Beekeeper Jamie Hughes describes it this way:

*There is nothing better than slicing a warm section of honeycomb from the frame and eating it straightaway, wax and all. The taste – radically different from the stuff you find on grocery store shelves – is so intense that it fills every inch of your head with scent and mouthwatering sweetness. Bees no bigger than your fingernail can fly as far as seven miles to get the best nectar, so honey can taste like anything from acacia blossoms to sage.*

Sadly, I am a late bloomer when it comes to listening to bee parables. I am wary of bee stings; I stepped on one once, and I’ll never forget it. I also find their buzzing annoying when I want to concentrate. I understand well the meaning of a “bee in one’s bonnet” – a word, phrase or a song, a worry that won’t stop replaying. Mind you, I am glad bees are there, doing their thing. And the facts of their doing are astounding: almost 80 percent of insect crop pollination is done by bees. Without bees, there would be no tomatoes, onions, lemons, watermelon, broccoli, blackberries, even peanuts. Every spring, millions of honey bees are trucked into California’s almond groves to pollinate the tree flowers.

What might be some of the spiritual parables these miracle workers are trying to teach? The first one I discover is found in the words of Kahlil Gibran: reciprocity. Gibran writes,

*And now you ask in your heart,*

*"How shall we distinguish that which is good in pleasure from that which is not good?"*

*Go to your fields and your gardens, and you shall learn that it is the pleasure of the bee to gather honey of the flower,*

*But it is also the pleasure of the flower to yield its honey to the bee.*

*For to the bee a flower is a fountain of life,*

*And to the flower a bee is a messenger of love,*

*And to both, bee and flower, the giving and the receiving of pleasure is a need and an ecstasy.*

Indeed, flowers have no arms, no legs; they rely on bees to carry their pollen to other flowers. The future of their species is guaranteed by their furry playmates. Bees not only gather precious droplets of nectar, they also enjoy the benefits of pollen's nutrition. Flowers woo bees with certain fragrances and colors. Bees dance among the blossoms.

I am a baby boomer. I was raised to be a consumer. In some ways, it's been a magical ride. Clothes made in Vietnam, almonds from California, books I can order online, hot food a short drive away, a laptop that quickly erases my bad grammar or poor word choices (*Do you remember typewriters and white out?*). And what I notice most—and it bothers me that I feel this way -- is that I am now left a bit bereft after an hour or two without my cell phone nearby. I've enjoyed an apple grove of consumerism, and I am spoiled. Indeed I share the lot of philosopher, Winnie-the-Pooh, who speculated to Piglet: "The only reason for being a bee that I know of is making honey...And the only reason for making honey is so as I can eat it."

Bees do not live by Pooh's philosophy. Instead, they operate in an economy of mutuality, within the hive, and in relation to the flowering world beyond the hive. It's true that they never stop working (they could use a Labor Day holiday) – but it's also true that in their reciprocal

economy, they help not only all of the bees in their own hive, but also the larger beehive that is our planet, God's beloved creation. A biologist points out that it was actually the bee who enabled green, lush vegetation to spread all over the Earth. Without bees, Earth would have a lot of barren wasteland.

It is this economy of mutuality that Paul was trying to teach the church at Corinth. The metaphor he chose was the human body. Paul was concerned that Corinthians were still living by a worldly economy: where the rich got special seats at the table, where slaves sat on the floor. Moreover, Jewish Christians thought of themselves as more worthy than Gentile Christians. No, Paul reprimanded, in the body of Christ, there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile. And the perception that some body parts are more important than others is not in keeping with the fact that we have all been baptized in one Spirit, and still drink from that same Spirit.

What Gibran adds to Paul's more admonishing tone, is that there is also sheer joy in giving and receiving; it can be both a need and a pleasure. I feel that joy of reciprocity in my relationship to my dog, Anna. She needs my care, and I need her presence. Anna is a parable to me of constancy. I often get up to read in the wee hours of the morning, and not long after I settle in, I hear her stretching into her downward dog yoga pose, her collar shaking, and hear her toenails clicking on the floor as she ambles down the hall and snuggles up next to me on the couch.

A second spiritual lesson that bees teach is also one shared by Paul in his letter to the church at Corinth: that is, that the small and seemingly insignificant has great worth. To think that in a bee's lifetime, after hundreds of miles of foraging and countless flowers visits, she will only produce 1/12<sup>th</sup> a teaspoon of honey and yet, and yet, as part of the body that makes up the hive, her contribution is multiplied gloriously. And for the flower she has pollinated, she is everything!

In Sermon Shaping, we talked about the recent Yard Sale. Countless hours donated for collecting, sorting, folding, stacking, pricing...in addition to the wonderful array of items given by others. If Men's Haberdashery claimed priority over White Elephant, or Linens thought

itself better than Collectibles, we would laugh. For we know that department by department, the thousands of tiny acts added up: this year, \$26,000, all donated to important causes! And items were recycled to others, items that might have ended up in the landfill.

And because I spend a lot of hours in this building, I see this generosity going on all the time. Pretty near daily, I witness hundreds of small acts of kindness and volunteer service that make Binkley and Chapel Hill thrive. We are actually a kind of beehive buzzing at the corner of Willow and Fordham, though unlike bees, I would also say that we know how to put our feet up from and enjoy dessert!

Finally, in the parable of bees, I discover something important about suffering. Paul reflected this as well: "If one part of the body suffers, every part suffers with it." Bees have been called the contemporary "canary in the coal mine," the harbingers of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. For much of the past ten years, beekeepers have reported annual hive losses of 30 percent or more, much higher than what is considered normal or sustainable. And 1 in 4 wild bee species in the U.S. are on the edge of extinction. The biggest reasons: industrial farming, parasites, pesticides, the lack of biodiversity in monoculture approaches to farming, and global warming.

We imagine oceans rising, and they are; more hurricanes, and there are. We see signs of Earth's suffering when whales belch up plastic, and we are becoming more attune to the ravages of our huge climate footprint. But it is still all too easy for humans to ignore the suffering of dying species and declining bees.

I find courage in one human bee, a 16-year-old activist from Sweden, Greta Thunberg. She just arrived in New York City on Wednesday, having been carried by a racing sailboat for two weeks from England, all to avoid flying. Thunberg has come for the UN Climate Action Summit, after being heard by leaders all over Europe, and raising a heck of a lot of money through her intrepid, continual protests and speeches. She is small stature, but tall in the best possible way. On September 20<sup>th</sup>, Buck Horton invites you to join him and others for the Global Climate Strike in Raleigh that Thunberg initiated.

Thunberg is living the parable of the bee, speaking loudly for the suffering of the whole yet to come if we do not act. Her words challenge me to think and live differently. She is the preacher for the bees, and thus to and on behalf of all of us in the hive called "Earth." Hear her fiery words spoken last November at the school climate strike. Thunberg proclaims:

*There have been no emergency meetings, no headlines, no breaking news. No one is acting as if we are in a crisis. Even most climate scientists or green politicians keep on flying around the world, eating meat and dairy. ... Today we use 100 million barrels of oil every single day. There are no politics to change that. There are no rules to keep that oil in the ground. So we cannot save the world by playing by the rules. Because the rules have to be changed. Everything needs to change. And it has to start today!*

A-men, Greta; thanks to you and the bees, we may learn something yet!