

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury
Sermon – June 19, 2005
“The Cost of Discipleship”

Romans 6:1-11, Matthew 10: 24-39
Pentecost 5, June 19, 2005
Lynne M. Dolan

During the April vacation I was looking for something fun to do with my son. My daughter had once visited a butterfly conservancy called Magic Wings. So, my son Bruce, his friend Emma and I packed a bag of snacks for the hour long ride to Deerfield and set out early on Friday morning. We took the proper exit off I-91 and headed east. I nearly passed this magical place. I had no idea what I was looking for. It looked rather like a greenhouse, for that is precisely what it is. Inside this dome of lush tropical flowers and plants live hundreds of beautiful butterflies. There were purple butterflies and blue butterflies. There were butterflies whose wings looked like zebras and tigers and others that blended more easily in with the greenery.

The butterflies have their own “coming out” room where caterpillars go to turn into butterflies. On the window of this mystical room, there is a chart to record the stages of transformation from caterpillar to larvae to butterfly. On the chart was a spent cocoon that once housed the yet to emerge butterfly. It was a magical place, so wonderfully and appropriately named, “Magic Wings.” Before you exit the butterfly house someone checks your clothing to be sure there are no “escapees.” If you love beautiful flowers and the delight of butterflies landing wistfully upon your shoulder, I encourage you to make your way to Magic Wings.

I came across a story told for children about a caterpillar named George. George was like any other caterpillar in most ways. He spent his days eating leaves and his nights sleeping in the tree branches with the other caterpillars. But one thing about George was different. He had never met a butterfly. The other caterpillars in his tree had all seen a butterfly. They had learned from the butterfly that they must, for a time, go into a dark cocoon before they too, could become butterflies. But George had not seen this majestic creature, as she spread her colorful wings to float on the breezes and land on a flower in a garden nearby. When the other caterpillars talked about the day they would become butterflies, George found it hard to understand because he had never met a butterfly.

Soon, as they continued to munch daily on leaf after leaf, the caterpillars grew fat and large. The wisest among them began to know that it was time to become butterflies. So

they began to weave cocoons for themselves. As they continued to weave their cocoons, they were joined by others who began to weave except for George.

George was frightened of the changes he felt taking place within him and frightened by the drastic changes taking place among his friends on the tree. George could see that they were small and dark. Inside he knew that his friends would be unable to move, unable to see, and definitely unable to munch on leaves. It seemed to George that his friends, as they made plans to enter these small dark houses, were going not to a new phase in their lives, but to death. It looked to George as if they were crawling into their tombs. It was especially difficult for George to consider building his own cocoon, because he had never met a butterfly. He could see the dark tight dreary quarters of the cocoon. But he had, in his imagination, no idea what lay beyond it. He did not have in his heart and mind a picture of the butterfly he could be.

Yet despite his doubts and fears, despite his feeling that weaving this cocoon meant death and not life, George did an amazing thing. If you were to ask him today why he did it, he would probably tell you it was a mystery because he wasn't himself sure why. After taking what he imagined might be his last bite of leaf before his death, George began to weave his cocoon. Slowly at first he wove and then more quickly as the weaving began to seem natural to him, as if it were something he were meant to do all his life. Then with the weaving finished George crawled inside his cocoon; into a space he was sure was too small for him. And he closed off the top of his cocoon and fell asleep. A few times in the long days that lay ahead, George would waken briefly and try to see, within the confines of his cocoon, whether outside it was day or night. But soon he would again drift off to sleep.

Then one day George awakened within his cocoon and did not feel sleepy nor drift off to sleep again as he had done previous times. This time George moved his head around a bit hoping to get a better look at things outside. As he did, he burst open his cocoon. Soon he found that, almost without knowing it, he was chewing off the rest of his cocoon and freeing himself from its confines. As the remainder of the cocoon finally dropped from his body and out of the tree, George shook himself off and began to unfurl four magnificent wings. They were delicate and beautiful with many colors. George wondered to himself, "Can these be mine?" "Well," thought George, "if these are my wings, then I must be able to fly." So testing out his theory, George began to move his wings until they lifted his chubby little caterpillar body, which had not yet become thin and graceful, off the branch. Filled with joy George rode the spring breezes, floating effortlessly through the air. He came to land on a flower, whose stem bent gently down toward a lake. Sitting on the flower, George looked at his own reflection in the water of the lake. And then George did see a butterfly.

Out of what George had believed to be death, came life; glorious life, more wonderful than the life he had once feared to lose. And George, the butterfly, laughed with delight.

In our gospel lesson for today, Jesus says some things that may sound a bit strange. He says he has not come to bring peace but a sword, that we must deny our family if we are to follow him and that in order to find life, we must be willing to lose our life for his sake. In the reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, we learn that our baptism was in fact our death. He talks about Christ dying to sin and calls all disciples to see their baptism in the same way. We learn that in baptism our old nature died, and that we have the opportunity to renew this baptismal commitment each we day as we put to death anything that separates us from our new life in Christ. After all, in Christ, we are a new being, through the Holy Spirit God is transforming us into something and someone entirely new.

These lessons may be familiar to us, but they are also challenging and difficult. They remind us that in order for the kingdom of God to happen within our lives, within our churches, and our community, we must give something up, let something die. This is the cost of discipleship. Some of us approach these lessons cautiously, even fearfully, as we try to discern what God is saying to me. What is it that I must put to death or let go of? Is there an attitude or a way of thinking that keeps me from experiencing the fullness of grace that Jesus intends for me? Is there some evil I must confront or truth I must speak to help lift some darkness and initiate a process of healing in my life or another person's?

George reminds me how difficult it is to change when I have no experience of this new thing that I am to become. His story speaks so wonderfully and simply to the mystery of faith. Like George, I fear this journey that God is calling me to initiate because I have no idea what it is I am to become. Just like George, I am afraid to leave behind what I know in order to embrace an entirely new way of being. Yet I know I must eventually muster up enough courage to submit to the mystery and trust that God has a plan for me. George eventually allowed the process he feared so deeply to take its course. He saw his friends go through it, and although he did not know what would happen in the end, he put his trust in the one who would be with him to the end. Then, despite his fears, George began to weave his own cocoon. Anna White shares this story about George to invite all disciples to consider our place in the mystical transformation that God has initiated among us. She says, "we who have been baptized into the death of Jesus, have been caught up in the mystery of the gospel. We have been called by that mystery to ask ourselves, 'what in my life, in my congregation, my community must die so that the kingdom of God may come alive?' As we weave this question into our souls, its answers may be different for each of us."

During the past year many people here at South Church been pondering such questions. The three groups considering issues of worship, infrastructure and membership have come to understand that in order to bring about change, some things may have to die. The way we have always done things may change. The way we relate to each other may be different. As we stretch our comfort zones, we may lose the feeling of intimacy we think we now possess. These are all legitimate concerns. However, despite our fears and concerns, God is encouraging us to build a cocoon. God will intricately weave a protective, womb-like structure around us that will allow that transformation to occur. We don't know how long God intends us to remain in this cocoon. I imagine there are many people like George who are reluctant to begin this cocooning process because we have never seen that thing, that butterfly, we have yet to become. Some may want to keep chomping on leaves, preparing for the gestation process, but procrastinating none the less.

Jesus says, as he so often does to his beloved, "do not fear." Let go, let the mystery unfold and I will be there with you. I will be there through your darkness, as you slumber, and as you emerge as something more beautiful than even you could ever imagine. It is time to let go and enter the process. What must we let die, in our church, in our lives, in this community, in order for this new thing to emerge? Perhaps we must let die some of the things that claim our time and seem so important, so that we may spend time in prayer, or bible study, or service, actively seeking the movement of God's spirit in our lives. Perhaps we must let die the fear of sharing painful secrets that when brought into the light will only help us form healthy relationships. Perhaps we must let die those ideas about ourselves and our worth that keep us from seeking to be all that we can be. We never approach or accept death easily. Yet, when we trust in God's power to transform all things in and through that fearful darkness, we are then excited at the possibility of what awaits us. Then, like George, we begin to weave. In the silence of our cocoon, we have the courage to wonder "what in my life, in my congregation, my community must die so that the kingdom of God may come alive?" I hope we will keep that question before us as we continue on this journey of transformation. Anna White invites us to take that first scary step forward, where we will not weave a tomb, but a birthplace, where God will create for us, from the death of those discarded pieces of ourselves, an even more glorious life. She says, "God is creating a life where, like George the butterfly, we will in time float gently on the breezes of God's spirit and laugh with delight." May it be so! Amen

Source:

Anna K. White, "Catching a Glimpse of a Butterfly," sermon for June 19, 2005.