

Pentecost, Proper 11, July 22 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland WA. Nigel Taber-Hamilton. Jeremiah 23:1-6, Psalm 23, Ephesians 2:11-22, Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

There's something going on at the top of one of my chimneys (of which there are six!). Every year birds manage to fall down the one that leads to the library. I call it the library because it has built-in bookshelves on two of the four walls, and freestanding ones on the other two. Back to the birds! I have some idea of what's going on, because it seems to happen around the same time every year – the top's obviously prime real estate for birds nests, and the fledglings are falling down before they've figured out how to fly.

How did I figure that out? A month ago the ominous “flutter, flutter, flutter” echoed from the fireplace – the sound that says “there's a bird trying to get out of the chimney.” Sure enough, when I looked up with a flashlight, there was a slightly fluffy Flicker (woodpecker) standing on the shelf inside the chimney just above the damper. I tried all the tricks I know. Put birdseed in the fireplace, put water in a dish in the fireplace, shine a flashlight up the chimney.

Next morning, still there. But then I heard an even louder commotion and – lo and behold – there's a bird in my fireplace! It didn't look as fluffy as I remembered, but there it was. I managed to usher it to an open window and it flew off.

Imagine my surprise, then, when about ten minutes later, another Flicker showed up in the fireplace! This was the one I remembered, a little fluffy – this was the fledgling. So what about the other one? It has to have been a parent, who came down the chimney looking for its child, and then tried – successfully, as it turned out – to show it the way out.

It's tricky to attribute particular emotions to other creatures in God's creation – but those of us who share our lives with other animals know that they definitely experience the whole gamut - happiness, sorrow, fear, anger - you name it. The Flicker was at least responding to a deep instinct to care for the well-being of a family member that was not able to do so for themselves.

It's one thing to fall down a dark tube that seems to have trapped you. It's another thing to choose to go down that dark tube without any idea if it's a deathtrap or not. Given a similar choice – knowing that someone important to you was down there – what would you do? Especially if someone you cared for was in that deep, dark place?

Perhaps the most effective way we learn is by the example of others. All of today's readings are about that example which lies at the heart of our faith – compassion.

Whether it's gathering the remnant of the flock, walking beside one who's path is dark and dangerous; whether its by (in the words of The Message translation) “dying that death, shedding that blood, whether its through an orientation that always first seeks to heal....its all about an outward-focused compassion - empathy not sympathy - toward others.

Compassion is what – according to all the readings – underpins God's covenant with us.

Jeremiah describes God's compassion, as seen in the divine focus on justice and righteousness, focused more narrowly on the Chosen People.

Ephesians sums up this justice and righteousness in one word: peace. In Christ, Ephesians says, God has made peace with all peoples, and the covenant that originated with Israel is – through Christ – expanded to include all humanity. Christ is our peace, our unity, joining diverse and otherwise divided people into one community of compassionate love. There are no aliens anymore; everyone is encompassed by God's covenant; love rules – or it should, we're being reminded.

Mark's Gospel offers something we often miss – a reflection on how (in contemporary language) pursuing the business of God can lead to burnout. Notice that it's Jesus who recognizes this for his disciples and seeks a "deserted place" – a retreat, I suppose – for them and for him. Loving the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength, and your neighbor....they'll be short-lived without some compassionate self-care. Mark shows the benefits of self-care – Jesus and his disciples return to their work with compassion and empathy. For Jesus, Mark says, these folk aren't nuisances but sheep without a shepherd, to be cared for and led to discover their own wholeness.

The work of compassion is never completed. The work of healing is life-long. And it can be tiring work, too. But – as with the Flicker woodpecker so with us – this is work that we have been gifted with the tools to do by God; God has put those gifts in us as if they're a part of our own DNA; we are naturally compassionate, loving peaceful creatures, we human beings, and as tiring as it can be to live out of that identity, it's also a gift that calms and soothes, that creates and nurtures relationship, that indeed can make us whole.

And the flip side is also true: that when we're not acting that way – as compassionate, loving, and peaceful creatures – we're going against the identity God has infused into each of us. No wonder we feel guilty when we act otherwise!

So learn from the woodpecker; be reminded of who we really are: compassionate people; and live into that God-given identity! And you will be blessed.