

## Cocoons and Butterflies

Matthew 10:24-39; Romans 6:1-11

I once heard 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. And that thing was that he 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 as well, until all the caterpillars on the tree had begun their weaving 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. Looking inside the cocoons of his friends as they worked toward completion, 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. 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 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 had come 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 to us a bit strange. Among them he says that if we wish to follow him, we must bring a cross, and that we will only find life if we are willing to lose our lives for his sake. In Paul's letter to the Romans, we learn that our baptism was in fact our death. We learn that in this sacrament our old nature died; and that, as we live under the power of this sacrament, we should each day put to death anything that separates us from our new life in Christ. These lessons are familiar to us. Yet as we read them again, they may be difficult for us to hear. Because they tell us clearly that in order for the kingdom of God to happen within our lives, our churches, and our community something must be given up. Some things, perhaps things that we treasure, must die.

So, like George the caterpillar, we may approach these lessons cautiously, even fearfully, as we look to see how their message of death and life will weave its way into our lives; yet, like George who, despite his fears, was caught up in the mystery of nature and instinctively began to weave a cocoon. 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, my congregation, my community must die so that the kingdom of God may come alive?”** As we weave this question into our souls, its answer may be different for each of us.

**Perhaps as we seek to answer it, we will see that we must let die our hope that things will become again like they once were in our church and our lives, so that we may look honestly at the way things are and catch a vision for how God's power can touch us in a new way.** (By the way, that is one question our Re-New – ReVise – Re-Kindle Task Force has been asking themselves.) Perhaps we will see that we must let die despair and fear, so that we may speak freely of our dreams and our hurts in order that hope and healing may thrive in our midst. Perhaps we will see that we must let die our ideas about the kind of people we like to have around us, those whom we wish to welcome into our fellowship, so that we can welcome those who are different from us and gain from one another more richness and beauty for our congregation and our lives. Perhaps we will see that we must let die some of the things that seek to claim our time, so that we may spend time in prayer, Bible study, and devotion, actively seeking the movement of God's Spirit in our lives. Perhaps we will see that we must let die addictions we have come to depend on; relationships that are unhealthy for us and yet nonetheless treasured; secrets that we fear to share with another, but know we must if we wish an honest relationship; ideas about ourselves and our worth that keep us from seeking to be all that we can be. Perhaps as we look into the cocoon of this question, we will see that the things we must let die will be difficult for us because they are all we know.

And, like George the caterpillar, we have trouble imagining what life will be like when we let them go. We have trouble seeing with our hearts and minds what it will be like on the other side. And yet God has promised that as we are willing to lose our lives for his sake, we will find them; that resurrection is awaiting us on the other side of the cross, and that life comes out of the daily deaths we must die. So, like George, we may begin to weave. **We may begin to ask ourselves: “What in my life, my congregation, my community must die so that the kingdom of God may come alive?”** We may do so confident that we are weaving not a tomb, but a birthplace, where God is creating for us, from the death of some things within us, an even more glorious life. 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.