

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I am afraid of bugs. I don't want them in the house. I don't like sitting outside if they fly around me or—worse—crawl over me. One of the magazines I read each week has a short nature column. Last week the writer, Jonathan Tulloch, shared his encounter with a daddy longlegs. You know this bug? Huge head, dangling spider legs. They look ferocious, but Tulloch says “they're harmless to all other life forms.... They eat nothing, their tiny mouths are only capable of sipping nectar.” But most of them don't live that long. Their life span is one year, and they spend most of it in larval form in the dark earth, where they are food for starlings. If they survive, they grow wings, fly around, navigate by the light of the moon, and look for mates. That's all they do. I still don't like bugs, but I've made some peace with daddy longlegs this week.

Francis of Assisi tamed a wolf, preached to birds, and wrote the Canticum of the Sun. He got into creation through the back door. Early in his life he struggled to love perfectly anyone who was poor. He achieved that love through humility, and his humility revealed to him that he was a brother to all of creation. We think about love as something wonderful that comes to us inexplicably. But love is also something we choose. Francis came to it along the path of humility. We enjoy the beauties of creation: sunrise and sunset, the waters of lakes, the clouds of the sky. We had nothing to do with any of it. To love natural beauty is to love humility.

That love inspires us to take action on behalf of nature. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops frames the environment as a pro-life issue. It promotes policies that ease the burdens of the poor, relieve workers displaced by climate change policies, and promote renewable energy sources.

We all love the earth, but we do not always care for it. Using public transportation takes time, but it preserves energy. Caring for the environment demands attention, but it promotes biodiversity, which stops the spread of viruses. We fear parts of the earth, from bears to bugs. Our faith teaches us to love our neighbor, care for the stranger, and be kind to all, even to a daddy longlegs. It's easier to love people—and animals—when we understand them. Understanding overcomes fear.

St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians has a beautiful reflection on achieving peace. Today's second reading gives this recipe: “Have no anxiety at all.” Put your requests into the hands of God. “Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” If we think too much about our worries, the catastrophes of nature, the pandemic, our struggles with racism, the polarization of our political parties—if we think too much about all of that, we miss what God has to offer. Paul says, “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Be concerned, but not fearful. The world is a beautiful place.

With regard to the environment, think of Paul's final advice today: “Keep on doing what you have learned and received.” It's going to take time, but we have a road map. We just have to keep at it. Then the world will regain its health, and we humans get the gift Paul promises: “the God of peace will be with you.”

Sunday, October 4, 2020