

FLYING HIGH¹
I Corinthians 12: 4-13
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Soledad O'Brien of CNN, reporting from Port au Prince, told about a child who was clutching a Bible. The child held her Bible up to the reporter and asked her if she would read something from it. So Soledad O'Brien let the Bible fall open and read the first thing she saw. It fell open to Psalm 22: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* Soledad O'Brien, who comes from a devout Catholic family, said at that moment she lost it.

I

Natural disasters like earthquakes always leave us with questions about God and innocent suffering. Even the disciples of Jesus asked him about such a catastrophe. When the tower of Soloam fell and killed eighteen people, they wanted some logical explanation that would make sense out of it. Jesus refused to make sense out of a tragedy such as that. He refused to give simple answers.²

There are some who interpret the earthquake in Haiti as punishment for sin their ancestors committed several centuries ago. That understanding of

¹ ©Thomas R. McKibbens, January 24, 2010.

² Luke 13: 4-5.

tragedy is a sad commentary on the state of compassion and a sorry understanding of God. Any God who would kill innocent people because their ancestors did something God didn't like centuries earlier, may be a God who can be feared, but not a God who can be loved.

I can't explain why there is such suffering in the world, but I do know this: those who are quick to blame tragedy on some vengeful, angry God profess a religion that I want no part of whatsoever. The Christianity we embrace is full of compassion, full of caring, and willing to roll up its sleeves in the face of tragedy and help fellow human beings who are suffering. If you are looking for a community dedicated to this understanding of Christianity, you have come to the right place.

II

I have an image of this church in mind. That image is the sight and the sounds of Canada geese in flight. Their synchronized wings in the V formation suggest a determined mission and cooperative purpose as they fly against the gray sky with beauty and grace.

There are some amazing facts about wild geese that suggest some things about the church. Like this: you rarely see a wild goose; it is always wild geese. Geese fly in company with other geese, and they always fly in formation. The reason for that is that when they fly in formation they fly 70% faster than birds

that fly by themselves. Now that sounds incredible, but I get this from a book by Browne Barr, who checked this out with a zoologist who confirmed it.³

There is an amazing aerodynamic efficiency in the V formation.

That formation allows these birds to fly enormous distances. Engineers have designed a tiny device called a geolocator, which can create a map of a bird's movements. A report came out this week of new research on the Arctic tern using the geolocator attached to the tern's leg. Until now ornithologists had only guessed at the range of the tern's migration, but evidence from the geolocators confirms that they fly 44,000 miles round trip, averaging 300 miles a day.⁴

We naturally place a high value on individualism in our culture. We say, "I want to do my thing." We say, "My religion is private." Baptists pride themselves in what we call "soul liberty." It's as though Frank Sinatra is our patron saint: "I did it my way." But Christian faith is not doing it "my way." Christian faith is a commitment to follow the way of Christ! There are Christians who say they don't need the church; they don't need community; they can worship alone in the woods. OK—you can also see an occasional

³ Browne Barr, *High-flying Geese* (New York: Seabury Press, 1983), pp. 1-2.

⁴ "A Tern Around the World," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2010.

goose out there alone. But if you want that goose to fly high, you will see it as part of a community of geese flying together.

III

Here is something else about geese: they keep company with the fallen. It has been observed repeatedly that geese will stick close to one of their own who is injured. James Michener wrote about that in his book *Chesapeake*. He tells about a goose whose mate had been shot down by hunters. The mate flew down and found her wounded and fluttering in the rushes. A hunting dog was heard barking, and the healthy goose fussed at the wounded gander, pushing it further out into the marsh for protection. There they found safety for a week until the wound was healed enough for the injured goose to fly again.⁵

In the scripture today we heard it: *If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.*⁶ It is our calling to keep company with the fallen!

I have always liked the story of the child who was late coming home, and she told her anxious parents that she had come across a friend who had dropped her beloved china doll, and it was smashed into bits on the sidewalk.

⁵ James A. Michener, *Chesapeake* (Random House, 1978), p. 585 ff.

⁶ I Corinthians 12: 26.

“Oh,” said her father, “you stopped to help her pick up the pieces.” And the child replied, “No, I stopped to help her cry.”

Keeping company with the fallen doesn't generate a lot of publicity; it doesn't get a lot of applause; but it is a great calling. It is the calling of helping the world cry. There are some things we can't fix. We can't always pick up the pieces. Like Humpty-Dumpty, we can't put some things back together again! But we can stop and embrace. We can be there to share the pain. We hear a lot about the importance of being a prophetic church, of being out front on the great social and ethical issues of the day, but even the most prophetic church must take the time to care for the fallen.

IV

There is one more thing about geese that I want to mention: they have two types of feathers. The first is down feathers. Down traps air that becomes insulating warmth. That's why a bird will fluff its feathers in the winter—to trap more air. Down feathers provide warmth. It's a built-in, portable, lightweight down comforter. The other kind of feathers on geese are called contour feathers. Those are the feathers that provide lift while flying. So they have two kinds of feathers: soft down feathers for warmth and stiff contour feathers for flying.

There is an analogy with the church. There are those who want to come to church and just enjoy a warm feeling. They just want the down feathers! I want to come to church to feel good! “There’s a sweet, sweet spirit in this place, and I know that it’s the spirit of the Lord!” Church is like a soft down comforter that we wrap around us when we are cold.

But if that’s all church is, then we are not flying high. Church must also have its contour feathers to take it aloft. Caring and justice ministries are not always warm and cuddly, but they provide us lift. Real love captures the wind of God and lifts us up, so that we can sing with the old revival song, “Love lifted me; love lifted me; when nothing else could help, love lifted me.”

V

Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian and philosopher, was pretty gloomy and pessimistic about the church of his day. He told a parable about a wild goose who went to live with some tame geese. That wild goose intended to liberate the domesticated geese from their barnyard life of mediocrity, where their food was rich and life was easy, but sadly the wild goose came to like the barnyard life. He came to enjoy the rich food of the domesticated geese.

Every year the wild geese would fly over and honk in flight, and he would flutter his wings and resolve to rejoin the wild geese and fly, but he never did, finally becoming so content that he forgot that he was wild.

Every congregation has the potential to become domesticated, to enjoy the rich food of the barnyard, and to waddle around thinking that the barnyard is all the world there is. But deep within the heart of every Christian is the knowledge that we are made for flying high. We are made to become airborne, upheld by God's grace. We are called to rise above the political divisions of our day, to rise above the narrow views of our particular barnyard, to rise above all racial and national and gender divisions, to rise above anything we have done in the past.

Waddling in our little barnyard has never been good enough for this church, and it is not good enough for this church today. Remember the promise from Isaiah? *Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles....*⁷

You have come here today with your own needs. You have come with honesty and with hope. Now may you leave with the words of the old gospel song ringing in your heart:

Love lifted me; love lifted me;
When nothing else could help,
Love lifted me!

⁷ Isaiah 40: 31.