

“To Come Alongside”

New London UMC

Sun., Sept. 5, 2021

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; James 2:1-17; Mark 7:24-37 *The Message*

Rev. Joyce Rich

Thanks to Jeri Popke, this week I’ve had the opportunity to reacquaint myself with the life cycle of metamorphosis that monarch butterflies go through. In case you also need a refresher on metamorphosis, let’s review each stage. The first stage begins with the adult female butterfly laying eggs on sturdy milkweed plants – usually on the underside of a leaf so the eggs won’t be washed away by rain. Inside the egg the larvae or caterpillar develops and then chews its way out and continues to consume milkweed leaves as it goes through five rounds of growing larger and shedding its exterior, in order to eat, grow, and shed again. After reaching its full potential as a caterpillar the final “shedding” process entails encasing itself in a chrysalis on a sturdy branch or structure. Within the chrysalis the pupa transforms into a butterfly. When the butterfly is ready to break out of the chrysalis case, it pushes through, and then continues to work at pumping moisture into its wings to expand them to their full size. If a well-intentioned person tries to “help” a butterfly break out of a chrysalis before it is able to do so on its own, the result is a butterfly with under-developed wings. And that butterfly will likely die early because it can’t travel far to find food from multiple flowers. Only fully mature female butterflies will be able to lay eggs for a new generation to follow them.

So at multiple points throughout the life cycle of metamorphosis, the caterpillar/butterfly has to physically push itself from one stage of development into the next stage. The effort of struggling and pushing actually helps to strengthen the caterpillar/butterfly in its growth process. . . . I want you to tuck that information away for a couple minutes, OK?!

This week I also learned more about what motivated Jeri Popke to volunteer her time and support for different organizations. I was particularly struck by her participation in bringing Habitat for Humanity to Waupaca County. Jeri liked the fact that Habitat focuses on providing a helping hand to families, not a hand out. Anyone who partners with Habitat is required to invest hours of “sweat equity” before they can receive a home, or have projects completed on their home. You can experience that for yourself if you part of a work crew working alongside homeowners Sept. 16 to 18 during Habitat for Humanity’s “Rock the Block” project days here in New London, or if The United Methodist Women serve lunch to the crews on Fri., Sept. 17. You can learn firsthand what Jeri wrote about Habitat: “It transcends all economic, social, religious, and race lines. Habitat not only builds houses, it builds the spirit of both families and volunteers.”

I understand that appreciating working alongside and with folks (instead of just providing a hand out to folks), and understanding the life cycle of metamorphosis, might seem like

two distinctly different things, but the two flowed together for me when I read this quote from Robert Lupton:

Personal responsibility is essential for social, emotional, and spiritual well-being. To do for others what they have the capacity to do for themselves is to disempower them.

The struggle for self-sufficiency is, like the butterfly struggling to emerge from its cocoon, an essential strength-building process that should not be short-circuited by 'compassionate' intervention.

Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How the Church Hurts Those They Help (and How to Reverse It)*, Kindle/iMac 1345

That quote comes from Robert Lupton's book, ***Toxic Charity***, which was published in 2011. Are you familiar with the term "toxic charity"? This is what happens when people intend to "do good" – but the results of their actions are far from good for the people they set out to "help." This is often true with what Lupton calls "one-way giving." Where the giver never takes time to get to know the people they want to help, and never asks what these people see as their needs; but instead the giver just decides what these people must need – based on their own perceptions and experience. While the giver may then feel "good" about "giving" – this process implies that the people they are ***giving to*** are objects of pity, and not their partners in changing a situation of chronic poverty. And this type of "one-way giving" often follows this cycle:

give once and you elicit appreciation; give twice and you create anticipation; give three times and you create expectation; give four times and it becomes entitlement; give five times and you establish dependency.

Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How the Church Hurts Those They Help (and How to Reverse It)*, Kindle/iMac 1353

Of course this cycle happens in a non-crisis setting where there is chronic need that requires long-term recovery and development instead of a "quick-fix" approach.

Yes, there will still be times when "one-way giving" is needed in a disaster or crisis situation. We see that when the Red Cross provides a meal and temporary shelter for residents of an apartment complex that has caught fire, or been extensively damaged by a tornado. The immediate, unexpected "need" for food and shelter are met – but then long-term recovery work needs to be done by the people who were displaced. They need to contact family or friends who will help them salvage what belongings they can, and find new short- or long-term housing, because the "temporary" shelter is just that: temporary.

And we are well-versed in responding to these kinds of immediate needs. How often do I tell you that we can make financial gifts to UMCOR to help people after disasters like an earthquake, a hurricane, flooding, blizzard, or wildfire have changed peoples' lives? Our gifts do help with immediate needs. But they also often help to build a bridge to long-

term recovery. For months and months after Katrina, UMCOR had people helping residents sort out what options were available to them for government assistance, or to connect them with volunteer work teams who would help them gut out what had been flooded and would start to mold in their homes. UMCOR will be providing that same type of assistance to bridge people into long-term recovery in the wake of hurricane Ida. UMCOR is doing similar work once again in Haiti as people continue to recover from the earthquake.

I emailed information to our congregation this week about the work that Winding Rivers United Methodist Church in New Lisbon, Wisconsin is doing to support a team that is coordinating receiving and distributing donations of basic supplies for the thousands of Afghan guests who have already arrived, and will continue to arrive, at Ft. McCoy with just one bag of belongings to start a new chapter in their lives. I know that there will be hundreds of congregations and service organizations that will step up to sponsor Afghani families who choose to make their new home in Wisconsin. Sponsors will assist them with finding apartments, employment, getting kids registered in school, connecting with doctors and dentists, learning where to shop, where to bank, and how to access public transportation – or how to get a driver’s license. That day to day, week after week contact during the first year will build relationships and enrich everyone with new understanding. It is the non-toxic, life-giving work of getting to know each other and working together.

Our reading from Proverbs asserts: “The rich and the poor shake hands as equals – God made them both!” And the reading from James asks: “Isn’t it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?” While the Gospel lesson highlighted that the healing power of God is available to everyone – but sometimes we need to advocate on behalf of our sisters and brothers, our community partners, who are suffering and in need of healing. May we live into these scriptures and share this good news with everyone that we stand and work together with each day.

Amen.