

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Thanksgiving Service
November 21, 2021

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

Some of us remember the name Julie Hoepfer.

Julie was the wife of Don Hoepfer, who were both members here at Our Saviour for a number of years.

Julie was also the daughter of Pat Di Sciorio.

Some of us may remember that name as well.

Pat was another member of Our Saviour, who has since died.

Julie, though, died early in life at the age of 53.

She died in 2014.

And if we didn't know, or maybe had forgotten, Julie loved butterflies. She and her husband Don had a butterfly garden at their home.

And the butterfly garden located on your left as you drive up our church driveway was donated by her husband Don and was dedicated in memory of Julie.

And it was Julie who introduced me to a wonderful book about caterpillars and butterflies entitled *Hope for the Flowers* by Trina Paulus. *Hope for the Flowers* by Trina Paulus.

The book was published in the early 70s, the copyright on the book is 1972 to be precise.

And I don't know if the title of the book is somehow playing on the idea of "flower power" from that era of the 70s.

I don't know. Maybe it is. But if you haven't read the book, I would encourage you to do so.

I find it to be a modern day parable of sorts, or a modern day allegory, a story with a hidden meaning, a story with a profound moral.

It is a powerful story, a commentary, as I see it, about our society really.

For in the story, a bunch of caterpillars are climbing over one another in an effort to reach the top of the tower of caterpillars.

For what purpose?

Why are caterpillars climbing over each other in order to get to the top? It is hard to say.

But it would seem that it is Paulus' social commentary on the proverbial ladder in which people climb over each other to outdo one another in status, power, wealth, fame, you name it.

We all climb, and climb oftentimes over each other to get ahead, to get a leg up, to be greater than our neighbor.

But, one little caterpillar in the book *Hope for the Flowers* is disillusioned by all this climbing and so comes back down.

Eventually, this caterpillar with the help of a friendly butterfly realizes what he must do.

He instinctively climbs a branch, hangs upside down from the branch and forms a chrysalis, and then...and then, this caterpillar transforms into a beautiful butterfly and flies off.

And by doing so, he now is able to achieve the great heights he aspired to, not by climbing with and climbing over all the other caterpillars.

He achieves great heights not by going along with the all the others in the tower of caterpillars.

No, he achieves great heights by becoming who he was always meant to be, a butterfly.

PAUSE

And so, what does that say about us? What is the moral of the story? But that we, too, can achieve great heights if we become what we have been meant to be.

Like a caterpillar that dies symbolically to its old self in the chrysalis, and is resurrected a butterfly...so, too, do we die to our old sinful self in baptism, and are raised so to become a new creation.

You and I are meant to be butterflies, not literally, but figuratively. We are meant to transform and become a new creation.

PAUSE

That is what Julie Hoepfer reminded me by sharing this book with me, and by giving witness to its message in her own life.

Julie got it, what it is to be a new creation of God, to become what God intends for us to be, to be people who allow God's grace to work in us and through us.

And I can't help but wonder if maybe Julie got it, because she was born on March 20th, which between March 20th and 21st is the first day of spring, the day we celebrate each year as hearkening the new creation.

PAUSE

Now, what I find so very interesting about this book is that it is titled *Hope for the Flowers*.

For again, it is a story all about caterpillars and butterflies, but it called *Hope for the Flowers*.

Why, right? Why call it *Hope for the Flowers*?

Well, no doubt Paulus named it such because the butterflies, along with bees and other insects, are the pollinators of flowers.

And without pollinators, flowers would not produce fruit or produce new seeds which subsequently grow into new plants.

Trina writes, "Without butterflies the world would soon have few flowers."

On a small scale, a lack of pollination results in a fruitless tree.

On a large scale, it could mean a shortage in the food supply for many species including our own.

And thus the title *Hope for the Flowers* reminds us of how butterflies have an important role to play in the well-being of all creation.

In the same way, when we become what God intends us to be, we play an important role in God's plan, too.

PAUSE

Now, what does all this have to do with Thanksgiving, you might wonder?

Why do I bring this story *Hope for the Flowers* to our attention this evening?

Why, because it relates well with our gospel reading tonight, and because it relates well to our Thanksgiving holiday.

PAUSE

In our gospel reading tonight, Jesus tells us not to worry about our life, what we will eat and what we will drink, or about our body, what we will wear.

Jesus tells us not to worry about such things.

And then Jesus uses images to hammer home the point.

The birds of the air don't sow and reap and store up food, and yet they have enough to eat.

And the lilies of the field don't worry about clothing, they don't toil or spin, and yet they are gloriously clothed.

The message is that God will provide for us.

Now, this does not mean that we are to be indolent, sitting around doing nothing. This does not mean that we just sit back and expect to be taken care of.

No, this is not a call to idleness, to inactivity. No, Jesus is not saying we can be sloths.

God is not an enabler for people who don't want to work.

This is not what Jesus is getting at here.

No, the message is to seek first the kingdom of God, and I would dare say that we are to seek first the kingdom that is in each of us.

We are to seek first what God has intended us to be, like the caterpillar that becomes a butterfly.

We are to seek first the kingdom in us. We are to seek first to live out the grace of God. We are to seek first to be butterflies, to be God's new creation.

And in this way, not only will we find our own needs met, but we will also provide for others around us.

It is like the butterfly pollinators which in their feeding on flowers provide the necessary pollination for flowers to continue to thrive...

It is like the hope for the flowers, which butterfly pollinators provide, which in turn provides then for future butterflies.

"Seeking the kingdom" starts with us becoming the new creation God would have us be.

Seek first the kingdom of God, seek first to be a new creation of that kingdom, whereby we then serve to help usher in that kingdom by the grace we embody.

By way of example, I liken the efforts the United Nations Climate Change Conference, which recently met, to this idea of hope for the flowers.

The conference plans to provide monies to poorer countries to help those countries with infrastructure to deal with the effects of global warming, and to help those countries reduce their own carbon emissions.

We might wonder why countries like the United States should support other countries. Why not take care of ourselves first?

The answer is that we have a responsibility to provide for other countries since we are one of the largest producers of carbon emissions.

And helping other nations, in long run helps us as well, like butterflies that help with the pollination of flowers, which serves the well-being of butterflies in the long run.

This is only one example, but the point is well taken: living out the grace of the God, becoming what God intends us to be, reaps dividends not only for others but for us as well.

PAUSE

Now, if I had one critique of the story *Hope for the Flowers*, it is this.

Nowhere in the story does the caterpillar who transforms into a butterfly...nowhere in the story is there an expression of gratitude.

Nowhere in the story does the caterpillar, now a butterfly, say, "Thank you."

Perhaps, it is implicit, for of course, the caterpillar is thankful to be a butterfly.

But the caterpillar, now a butterfly, doesn't actually utter the words, "Thank you," particularly to the other butterfly in the story who had showed him the amazing possibilities that existed apart from the tower of caterpillars he was climbing.

Nowhere do we hear "thank you."

I bring this point up because in my estimation, that which empowers us to become a new creation, that which empowers us to live out the grace of God, is our desire to express our thanks.

Our faithful response to God is empowered by gratitude.

We become more and more what God's intends us to be because we are first and foremost thankful for what God has already done in making us people with great potential.

Let me say that again, we become more and more what God intends us to be because we are first and foremost thankful for what God has already done in making us persons with potential.

Gratitude is the engine of new creation. Gratitude is the mechanism behind the transformation of the world.

And if we are truly thankful for whom we may become...

Then to show our thanks we will want to become our fullest potential.

We then will want to become persons who live out God's grace.

I think we understand this implicitly, this notion of becoming fully the persons God wants us to be.

This is why children go to school, after all.

This is why devote so much attention to education and to extra-curricular activities like sports and the arts.

We want kids to become their fullest potential.

Otherwise we are not thankful.

Otherwise our children would not blossom into amazing adults, but would wither and fade.

So we are implicitly thankful to God, and we do encourage the grace of God to flourish in our children.

But all the more, every individual's development really does start with a most sincere heart full of gratitude and a most sincere desire then to excel, so as to give glory to God.

PAUSE

Now, I noted in our newsletter for November that Thanksgiving may just be my favorite holiday of the year, even more so than Christmas and Easter, which might sound strange coming from a pastor.

But, Thanksgiving is the one holiday we can all get behind because it does not discriminate on the basis of religion, unlike like Christmas, or Hanukkah, or Eid al-Fitr (aiyeed al feeter) at the end of Ramadan.

Thanksgiving is a national holiday for all, and on this holiday we give thanks for the many blessings we experience in life, which for me is perhaps the best vision of what heaven is all about.

The vision of heaven for me is eternal praise to God. The vision of heaven is one of the unending thanks to God. Pure and simple.

So, Thanksgiving is the closest we come to a glimpse of that vision of eternity.

I pray that as a human family we might continue to foster a deep sense of gratitude, because gratitude will empower our response to become fully who God intends us to be.

And when we become wholeheartedly agents of God's grace in the world, well then there will be a realized hope not just for the flowers, but hope for all of creation.

There will in fact be an in-breaking of God's eternal kingdom.

Let us give thanks, let us become agents of God's grace, and let us usher in that wondrous thing call realized hope.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.