

The Rev. Joel Petruschke  
Our Saviour/St. Stephen  
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Sisters and Brothers in Christ, 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.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, a few years back my wife and our son Jonah, and I, decided to do some beach camping at Cape Lookout, NC.

Now, I need to admit that this was my idea.

I wanted to camp under the shadow of the Cape Lookout lighthouse.

And I wanted to do some stargazing at night with my family where there was little if any light pollution.

My wife was game because she liked the idea of waking up right on the beach.

And Jonah was game. This was “old hat” to him.

As an Eagle Scout he had camped in all environments, so camping on the beach would be nothing new to him.

Mary opted not to come along, which proved to be the wise decision.

Now, the first day we got to the ferry station and took the ferry boat out to the island, and we set up camp, we pitched our tent, and we enjoyed an afternoon of beach time.

And that night was pretty much uneventful as well, except it was cloudy so we couldn't really see any stars. Maybe we would tomorrow evening. Wrong.

It was the second day, when things changed for the worse.

You see, after stopping in at the ranger station on the island in the morning, I went back to our campsite and informed Kathy and Jonah that the ranger station was closing early today.

“Why?” my wife wanted to know.

“Well, because there is a storm coming and the park rangers are getting off the island at 3:00,” I replied.

Now, this should have been my first sign. But I figured we could ride the storm out. After all, we had my son who was an Eagle Scout.

Nope. Bad idea.

The storm came rolling in that evening, and boy did it ever come rolling in. The winds picked up, the rain fell, and lighting flashed all around us.

And after the violent winds literally splintered our fiber glass tent poles, and the tent collapsed on us, we decided it was time to abandon the campsite and make our way to the public bathrooms...

...where we spent the greater part of the night with not a stitch of dry clothing, where we tried to sleep on a sandy cement floor, and where we shivered, because even though it was 80 degrees, water evaporating on the skin is a cooling process, and so we were shivering.

The next day we began making calls to the Ferry Company, asking, all but begging them to come get us.

They said, “With the storm still blowing, there was a small crafty advisory and no boats were running that day.”

Next we called the Cape Lookout Visitor’s Center on the mainland, asking them where the “hidden key” was for getting into the island’s visitor center, so that we could at least get out of the elements.

They said they would call us back. A few minutes later they called back and said that they had called the Ferry Company and had told them to get us off the island.

So about an hour later the ferry boat came across the water, the winds still blowing sideways, whitecaps everywhere on the surface of the water, and we were rescued.

We learned that we had been in the middle of a type of storm known as an atmospheric river, a storm that just lingers and that continually funnels water to a specific location.

In fact, we learned our particular storm was expected to drop as much as 10 inches of rain in 24 hours.

PAUSE

Now, I share this experience because it wasn't a complete loss, even though our tent was in tatters and most everything else in the tent was waterlogged and ruined.

No, the trip was not a complete loss, for we learned something very interesting.

I mean, besides never to ride out a storm when even the park rangers decide to close early and leave for the mainland.

No, I learned something once we got back to the mainland.

After we got some sleep at a local hotel, and got some food, and then got into dry clothes, having gone to a laundry mat.

After all that, we went for a walk in town and visited the town's visitor center, where we learned about hermit crabs.

You see, the young man at this visitor center was talking about the hermit crabs that appear on the local beaches.

And he asked if we knew that hermit crabs shared a symbiotic relationship with sea anemones.

Now, Kathy, Jonah, and I had no idea.

Indeed, the most interaction I had had with hermit crabs was at the boardwalk in Ocean City, New Jersey, where stores sell hermit crabs to would-be customers.

If you have been the boardwalk in NJ you know exactly what I am talking about.

And so, neither I, nor Kathy, nor Jonah knew that hermit crabs shared a symbiotic relationship with sea anemones.

So, the young man proceeded to tell us that hermit crabs will carry sea anemones on their shells.

And the sea anemones serve to protect the hermit crab from predators, because the sea anemone have stingers in its tentacles to ward off harmful predators.

So, the arrangement is of benefit to the hermit crabs.

Meanwhile, the sea anemones benefit because the hermit crab's messy eating leaves scraps behind for the sea anemones to consume, as well as the sea anemones move around with the hermit crab to various fresh, nutrient-rich waters.

So, it is a win-win.

And we learned that the most interesting thing of all, is that when a hermit crab moves from one shell to another, the hermit crab will literally peel the sea anemones off its old shell and re-attach them to its new shell.

You can google this and see it for yourselves. It is quite amazing.

Just google "hermit crab and sea anemones changing shell."

So, like I said the beach camping trip to Cape Lookout was not a complete loss, for we learned about this really cool symbiotic relationship between the hermit crab and sea anemone.

PAUSE

I bring this to our attention, because today's reading from 2 Corinthians is in its own right a depiction of a sort of symbiotic relationship.

So what is going on in this passage? First off, what is this "generous undertaking" which Paul refers to here?

Well, you see, the early church supported Paul's mission to the Gentiles, but there was one stipulation.

Paul was tasked with collecting an offering from the Gentiles he evangelized, so as to support the poor Jewish Christians back in Jerusalem.

The collection was meant to be a sign of good faith on the part of the Gentiles.

I guess we could say the collection would endear the Gentile Christians to the Jewish Christians.

And so what Paul does, is explain here in this passage from 2 Corinthians the symbiotic relationship that is set up between the Gentile Christians and the Jewish Christians.

Both sides have quote unquote “an abundance” to be shared with the other.

The abundance the Gentile Christians have is an abundance of financial resources which can be shared with the poor Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

And the abundance the Jewish Christians have is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Jewish Christians were the first to receive the Good News of Jesus Christ, and only through the ministry of Paul predominantly, does the Good News go out to the Gentiles.

So both parties have an abundance to share for the other.

And this then is Paul’s rationale for the Gentile Christians in Corinth to finish the collection they had started so that it can be transferred to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and this then will allow for the Jewish Christians to receive their Gentile sisters and brothers with open arms into the Christian faith.

Paul says, “It is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.”

PAUSE

Now if Paul was aware of the symbiotic relationship that existed between the hermit crab and sea anemone, it would have been easy enough for Paul to describe the relationship between the Gentiles and Jewish Christians in terms of the hermit crab and sea anemone.

Did Paul know of this symbiotic relationship, who knows?

But my point simply is this.

Our God seems to like symbiotic relationships in nature.

And the hermit crab and the sea anemone are just one example of such relationships.

There are others.

The Nile crocodile and the Egyptian plover is another. The plover is a bird that picks the teeth of the crocodile for food. The crocodile in return gets free dental work.

There is also the symbiosis between sharks and pilot fish, where the pilot fish eats scraps from the shark's meals, but also cleans harmful parasites off the sharks. The pilot fish also benefit from the protection of the shark.

And then there is the symbiosis between the Colombian lesserback tarantula and the dotted humming frog, which have been known to share a burrow. The tarantula provides protection to the frog, whereas the frog eats carnivorous ants that attack and eat the eggs of the tarantula.

Yes, our God seems to like symbiotic relationships, which may speak volumes to us as Christian people.

The question being: how can we, as Christians find ways to work with other congregations in mutually beneficial ways?

How can we benefit and benefit others by being in relationship with other congregations?

Or to put it another way, who is the sea anemone to our hermit crab?

Most recently we have been in partnership with Our Saviour/St. Stephen Lutheran Church.

We here at (Our Saviour) graciously offered pastoral support to St. Stephen.

And St. Stephen graciously compensated Our Saviour.

It has been an arrangement that has been mutually beneficial.

PAUSE

And we are not alone, more and more congregations in our synod are recognizing the need for such partnerships.

Many congregations are realizing that they can't sustain their ministry without sharing pastoral resources.

But sharing pastoral resources should not be the sole reason for entering into these partnerships.

It may be the primary reason, the paramount reason for such partnerships.

But there is so much more to be gained from one congregation aligning itself with another congregation.

What can we learn, for instance, about doing social ministry that we aren't doing ourselves?

What can we learn about fundraising that we aren't doing ourselves?

What can we learn about worship that is distinct from our way of doing worship?

What can we learn about grace, or generosity, or God's love?

This is not to say that we are ignorant of these things.

But there may be ways to broaden our understanding and perspective and that is always, always a good thing.

And on the other side, what things do we do really well, that we can share with others?

PAUSE

You know, God's creation is remarkable. Yes, there are examples of violence in the animal kingdom, but then, as I have highlighted, there are also a lot of examples of working together between species you wouldn't expect.

And it is this civility, this sociability that gives us hope of the eternal vision of the end time, when the wolf and the lamb will lie down together, and the leopard and the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together.

And, if many animals can seem to get it—that need to partner with another, then hopefully we humans can get it, too.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.