

June 29, 2014

TEXT: I Corinthians 12:12-20, 26

TITLE: News from Pittsburgh – Out of Africa

It's been a quiet week in Pittsburgh, my adopted hometown. The Pirates are above .500. World Cup fever has given us a pleasant sporting distraction. And enough sunshine has broken through the clouds to allow zucchini buds and tiny tomatoes to appear in our backyard gardens. Pittsburgh may be our home, but for others it is a destination – like for Emily and Jeff Karsten who drove into town to catch a plane at our airport. The Karstens live in the Laurel Highlands near the quiet little town of Gallitzin, PA. To get to here, they drove south to State Highway 23 toward Cresson, then west onto US 22 until finally route 376 got them efficiently out to the airport. Watch your speed, limit your toilet breaks and you can make the trip in about two hours.

Gallitzin is named after Prince Demetrius Gallitzin – a Russian aristocrat whose conversion from the Russian Orthodox Church to being a Roman Catholic priest led him to break with his family and homeland forever. The Prince-Priest arrived in America in 1792. He soon made his way from Baltimore to here and earned the title “The Apostle of the Alleghenies.” He established a Catholic mission in Cambria County, where the Basilica to St. Michael the Archangel still exists outside the little town that bears his name today.

Emily and Jeff have lived near Gallitzin for most of their lives. It's a small town – population 1,756 according to a recent census. There's not much there in terms of business or industry, but tourists stop by occasionally to see the historic railway tunnels of Gallitzin. For local news they read the Altoona Mirror, or they gather in the drugstore outside of town. There by the cash register, folks can get the real scoop that isn't reported in the paper. Everyone likes hearing a little gossip. Sure, these are all good Christians who believe in forgiveness, but they also like to know exactly what it is they are forgiving others for.

Emily teaches U.S. History and Civics at a local junior high school. That's one of those subjects where it's hard to make the material exciting. At some point you simply have to give multiple choice tests on the Federalist Papers, John Jay, the Articles of Confederation, and the Stamp Act of 1765. Emily still has her class memorize things: *When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the bands which have connected them with another – We the people, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility – Fourscore and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.* Emily tries to liven up the class with trivia that appeals to 11 year old boys – like how John Quincy Adams used to swim naked in the Potomac river, Thomas Jefferson served the first french fries in America at his home in Monticello, and William Howard Taft was so fat, they had to install an extra-large bathtub in the White House just for him.

For Emily, history was a lens through which she looked at life. She'd say things like, "Marriage is like the Electoral College: it works O.K. if you don't think too much about it." But Emily had always wanted to see the world beyond Gallitzin. She had told Jeff for years that they needed to travel overseas. Which was why they had driven two hours to board a plane in Pittsburgh that would connect to one at J.F.K. airport and eventually take them all the way to Africa.

Truthfully, Jeff would have been happy just to stay home – or at least, stay close to his work in the Prince Gallitzin State Forest – that expanse of 24,000 forested acres nestled around the shores of Glendale Lake. Jeff was a botanist by training, who specialized in the study of tree communication – which was a subject that invariably raised eyebrows when he tried to explain it to neighbors or visitors to the State Park. Jeff could stand on a forested ridge near the hiking trail and tell how a cluster of poplars is doing as well as what those trees are telling each other about how they are doing. Now if the hikers listening to Jeff raised their eyebrows or looked askance at one another, Jeff knew to change the subject. But he also knew there is truth in the science of tree communication.

Back in the early 80s, a chemist named David Rhoades was looking for evidence to prove that plants actively defend themselves against insects. He studied two groups of willow trees, one of which was infested with caterpillars. He discovered that the trees under attack deployed an unsavory chemical into their leaves to discourage the hungry bugs. But what surprised Rhoades was that the nearby uninfected trees had also adjusted their internal chemicals so that their leaves would be uninviting should any caterpillars make their way over to them. The press got hold of Rhoades work and soon everyone began writing about how trees talk to one another – until a famous ecologist came along and claimed that Rhoades' studies were poorly designed and his conclusions couldn't be trusted. Suddenly Rhoades couldn't get funding anymore to continue his research, so he quit science altogether and opened a bed and breakfast; and the whole subject of plant communication fell silent for years.

But a few scientists like Jeff had not given up on Rhoades' research. One botanist had shown that sagebrush can produce high doses of methyl jasmonate, which is an airborne chemical effective in chasing off insect pests. And when damaged sagebrush grows near other plants, their neighbors also begin producing chemical inhibitors to scare off hungry, hungry caterpillars. It turns out that almost every green plant that's been studied releases its own cocktail of chemicals which other plants can sense and respond to. Lima beans being eaten by beetles send out a chemical that warns other lima bean plants to grow faster and resist attack. Damaged corn plants send out signals to seedlings nearby to prepare for an attack from armyworms. Even the fresh smell of cut grass is a blend of chemicals that is pleasant to our noses, but which signals danger to other plants near to our lawn.

Jeff was happy to stay near Gallitzin and spend his days walking through the dense forests of his state park, thinking about how the roots and branches and chemicals of God's botanical creations were interacting on a daily basis. Emily too was content to teach her classes of pre-teenagers about the roots of democracy, the interconnected branches of the U.S. government, and the crazy chemistry of modern politics. But both of them had reached a point in their lives when they needed a different perspective - a broader view on life than what was available to them in the Laurel Highlands.

Jeff and Emily's planes eventually deposited them in Nairobi, Kenya, where a tour bus took them through the busy city and out on a dusty road toward the Samburu game park. Jeff was fascinated by the plant life he saw – the acacia groves, the thorny desert scrub brush and the massive baobab trees. Emily loved seeing the people – the barefoot children running through the marketplace, the women in their colorful fabric skirts, the melodious vowels of Swahili and the heavily accented English being spoken all around them.

After a brief stop at their lodge to unpack their suitcases and splash some water on their faces, Emily and Jeff were loaded into Land Rovers for a sunset drive through the game park. Like true tourists, they were excited when they first saw baboons and vervet monkeys up close, although the novelty of these pesky primates soon wore off. The bright plumage of kingfishers, bee-eaters, and lilac-breasted rollers was always a joy to see against the African blue sky. And then, in the later part of the day, the jeeps crested a ridge overlooking a wide valley near a watering hole – and the view took Jeff and Emily's breath away. They had seen African animals before; they'd both been to the Pittsburgh zoo. But here they were all together in one mixed herd: impala with their curved horns; warthogs snuffling through the grass and dust; zebras flicking their tails; ostriches and cranes walking around the perimeter; wildebeests with their permanently furrowed brows and thick, angry necks; giraffes elegant in their strides as their long necks placed their mouths at precisely the right height to reach the leaves of the wide-branched trees of the savannah; and off to one side, a lone bull elephant with uneven tusks, making his way slowly to drink from the sky-reflecting waters.

Having been accustomed to seeing all these animals in separate zoo enclosures, it was striking to see them together in all their diversity. Of course they lived together! Large animals eating grass whose hooves stirred up insects for the birds. And when one of them was startled, or snorted, or took off running, they all were warned. Not different at all from Jeff's tree communication. And it was a fresh way of understanding the messy interconnections of humanity captured in Emily's history textbooks. For Jeff, it called to mind a few lines from a famous foreign aristocrat. Not Prince Gallitzin, but rather the Baroness Isak Dinesen, who wrote "Out of Africa." When Denys Finch Hatton took her up in an airplane for the first time, she saw this as an incredible gift – "a glimpse of the world through God's eyes. And she thought, 'Yes, I see. This is the way it was meant to be.'"

Our vision of life too often focuses on what makes us distinct from one another – how we are clustered into family units, city regions, nations bounded by invisible borders. But our vision is not God’s vision. Jeff remembered the old words from the apostle Paul. “The body does not consist of one member but of many.” Because a foot is not a hand, that does not make it any less a part of the body. Because the ear is not an eye does not make it any less important to the body. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” He also remembered a prayer from William Penn, that a “horizon is nothing except the limit of our sight; so lift us up higher, O strong Son of God, that we may see further.”

As the sun slowly set and the animals milled around the waterhole in that African savannah, Jeff and Emily were silent. But a mind once expanded never returns back to its former size, and a heart of faith enlarged by grace and visions of God’s diversity never shrinks back to its old provincial habits. The interconnections of life are part of the God-given miracle of life. They are what make us more than individual trees in a forest, more than individuals appearing on the pages of history. The interconnections we cherish and protect with all God’s children and all God’s creatures are what make us fully human and fully alive. It’s to glimpse the world through God’s eyes. Yes, then we see – this is the way it was meant to be.

And that’s the news from Pittsburgh, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the Presbyterians are above average.