

Susan Gascho-Cooke  
September 9, 2018  
“Let the Shell be the Shell”

Good morning! I am so happy to be here with you this morning! To look around at each and every one of you ... to know there are new folks to meet,

Your care for your pastors, your care for me—you as individuals, and as a church body—made it possible for me to be away this summer, to have an extended Sabbath rest. And I come back to you full of gratitude for the rest I was able to have, for the sleep I was able to get, for the learning I was able to do, for the practices I was able to immerse in, for the time I was able to have with family and friends, and for the space to experience renewal.

Sabbaticals are important for pastors *and* for congregations. As the MCUSA sabbatical recommendations say, “Congregations sometimes become bored or over familiar with one pastor’s style, gifts and perspectives.” So, perhaps this summer was a nice palate-cleanser for you all, as well ☺

To Amanda, Malinda, Rod, Pam, Verna, Staff Relations – all of you who preached and led worship and coordinated services and visited each other on behalf of the congregation, and generally kept the home fires burning: I know that there was a cost beyond the church budget for my sabbatical, and “thank you” is inadequate, but I thank you all, nonetheless.

Tomorrow, Leslie Homer-Cattell joins our staff here as our new and first Administrative Pastor, bringing in a new era for CMCL: new leadership and perspective, and a very welcome partner in ministry for Amanda, Malinda and myself.

So much to be grateful for as I return!

This morning’s sermon is much more of a reflection than a fully-fleshed out sermon. Having been in the office only since Wednesday I haven’t had the usual amount of time to steep in the theme and scripture.

The theme of this Sunday is “Humanity” – as one sub-set of the broader theme of “Seasons of Creation.” And in some ways, I think “humanity” was also the theme of my sabbatical.

On the very first day of my sabbatical back in June, I jumped in the car and drove up to Connecticut, to a Catholic retreat center on the Long Island Sound called Mercy by the Sea. I was at that particular place because it’s about halfway between Lancaster, PA and Portland, Maine, where my closest friend from seminary now pastors. She was on sabbatical this summer, too, and we decided to do a retreat together. Our intention was to catch up, to share stories of life in ministry, and to see if there was any wisdom we could share with one another about our current life and vocational questions. I had thought, perhaps, we’d each be able to provide deep insights, of a theological or intellectual nature, into the callings we’re now 16 years into. I do think we helped one another immensely, but it was mostly in laughing and commiserating, and in the questions we asked to find out more of each other’s stories.

Perhaps the biggest gift that those days with Cindy gave me was the reminder that I am still the same person who went into seminary almost 20 years

ago. Because the person I was then came out to play with Cindy, and I realized that I still know her, I still *am* her – the me that went to seminary at 23, and started pastoring at 25. The me that was just a young human, following her heart and her curiosity and trying to figure out her calling in life.

It's one thing to know that intellectually, but it's a whole 'nother thing to see and feel and be: "Oh, there you are! How have I missed you, if you've been here all along?" And that's what I got back in June on the Long Island sound.

One of the unique beauties of that retreat center was its little beachfront on the sound. There was an abundance of shells, many of which were similar to shells I've seen and collected along the Atlantic – whelks, angel wings, conches, cockle shells. Curiously, they were only tiny, tiny versions of these shells -- doll-house sized, though even more exquisite for their size. But on this beach there was also a shell I'd never seen before – it looked like gold leaf had been scattered along the beach, or perhaps a pirate's chest of gold coins had washed ashore, after being worn thin and translucent by the sea. Clearly, they were what was left of the inside of some kind of shell, all iridescent yellows, golds, and oranges.

It wasn't until I was writing this sermon that I finally Googled to find out what they were. Turns out they're called jingle shells! I'll pass some around for you to look at – both the jingle shells and some of teeny-tiny whelks and conches.

As I walked along the beach, picking up shells, I found myself moving almost immediately away from the sensory experience of their beauty, and right on to: "hmmm, what could this *mean*? I'm gathering gold on the first week of my sabbatical – maybe this means that my inner treasure chest will be replenished, and maybe the tiny size of the shells means that I should pay attention to even the smallest things, and that that's where the gifts of this sabbatical will be found ..."

Wait! I caught myself – and realized, I wasn't experiencing this beautiful place at all. I was trying to hoard it away for a future sermon, or tidbit of wisdom to share in ministry or conversation. Which is what I'm almost always doing, consciously or unconsciously.

So I decided right then and there that one of my goals for sabbatical was to let the shells be shells, and let me be me. As Mary Oliver says in her poem, "Wild Geese: "let the soft animal of my body love what it loves."

I wanted to honor that the objects of my attention are their own subjects, far beyond any object lesson I could hijack them for. The pure joy of experiencing or beholding something that brings me delight and wonder is enough ... even if it never fulfills a "function" like becoming the subject of a sermon or song or piece of art. I am allowed to experience just for the sake of experiencing.

One of the things that sets humans apart from other animals is our capacity for, and inclination toward, rumination and reflection. But this summer, it felt like the best way to honor my humanity was to cut back on ruminating, and to sink into my body, to follow it and be entirely *in it* as it walked in the world.

In pastoring, as in other related professions, in so many ways the resource you bring to the table is quite literally yourself. And when you get tired, and your heart and mind get too full, it's like being a candle where the wick gets too long and

folds over and then you have a double wick with a bigger flame. Even if you're made of some really good quality wax, your candle is going to burn down too fast, in a puddle of left-behind wax.

For it is so often our bodies that reveal the truth of our being. Even though they can do amazing things in crisis, the truth of one's life is eventually borne out in the body.

One of the books I've been slowly reading through this summer is *The Wisdom of the Body*, by Christine Valters Paintner. In the introduction she writes: "Christ's incarnation points to embodiment as one of the most important spiritual journeys we make... If we believe God became flesh, how might we take the incarnation seriously by entering into intimacy with our own bodies? "This is your body, your greatest gift, pregnant with wisdom you do not hear, grief you thought was forgotten, and joy you have never known," Paintner quoting Marion Woodman.

She invites us to "practice radical hospitality to ourselves in all forms," for in so doing "we begin to draw together [our] broken pieces and return to wholeness."

The handful of scriptures that were suggested for this Sunday about "Humanity" were reminders of how deeply entrenched we are (at least in "western," European, "Judeo-Christian" culture) in the notion of our set-apartness and superiority to the rest of creation.

In Genesis, we are declared to be made in the image of God, and to be *good*, and right away we are to multiply ourselves, and give names to and have dominion over all creatures.

In Psalm 8, we read that we are "just lower than God ... crowned with glory and honor" and all creatures are "under our feet."

In Matthew and Philippians, the verses are about human squabbling between ourselves about who is greatest.

There's a thread through all these passages that's so unsurprising – just a sort of re-arranging of the deckchairs on the ship of Chosenness and Superiority, which we've boarded unquestioningly thinking our tickets were free and deserved. We generally accept that we *are* the most powerful of all creatures, and focus our concern, of any, on being or at least sounding sufficiently benevolent.

But what good has our set-apartness done for us as humans?

The Ashanti people of Ghana, record their traditional wisdom in a series of shorthand symbols, called *Adinkra* symbols you would recognize many if you saw them, such as the Gye Nyame, and the Sankofa bird (reaching back over its back). But there's a less well known one, at least here in the U.S., which is the symbol of Siamese crocodiles: two crocodiles who share a belly or stomach. It's a four pointed figure, with a central circle and two heads pointing out from North and West, and two tails pointing out from South and East.

The idea is to remember that we are linked—our fates are tied. But of course this wisdom is not just about crocodiles sharing stomachs with other crocodiles, or humans sharing stomachs with other humans. We share a stomach with the crocodile, with the jingle shellfish, with the orcas of the Pacific, with the honeybees, with the angry Atlantic preparing to dish up a hurricane of historic proportions.

The earth is screaming her confusion, fear and indignation and we watch as if the body being burned was not our own.

This is what incarnation is about: God being with us. Jesus Christ being born and living and walking among us was God showing us that God shares a stomach with us, too. To show us that there is no separate fate ... God is in it; God is all in.

I think there's tremendous significance to the fact that in the Christian story God came to us in a body. God came to us through a woman's body. Our capacity to reflect and ponder may be a human distinctive, but our physical characteristics are what mark us as *homo sapiens*. We may have deeper sentience and souls, but we negotiate this life as physical bodies. The fodder for our thought and imagination is our lived, embodied experience in the world. So, to follow Christ, is to share bellies with all of creation, too.

Sometimes I think, in reaction to the almost idolatrous emphasis in much of Christianity on the literality of scripture, progressive Christians have lost the sense of the embodiedness of gospel. When we argue over a bodily resurrection, for example, we throw the body under the bus, because we falsely equate physicality and literality. We lose sight of the significance of the fact that in the central story of our faith tradition, be it understood literally or mythologically, the incarnation was *bodily*. Jesus' healings were *bodily*. The crucifixion was *bodily*. The resurrection was *bodily*.

How can we love this world, if we cannot love bodies? How can we love our neighbors, if we cannot love bodies? How can we be participants in the healing and care of the earth if we do not do so with our bodies? So much of the pain of the world comes from discrimination based on how people are embodied, or the judgments others make based on how they observe others' bodies: how they look, how they act, how much space they take up, who they love, what piece of land their body happens to be on!

Another book I have been finally reading this summer is *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nehisi Coates. I noticed that he almost never says just "me" or "myself" or "us" but rather, "my body" or "our bodies" or "black bodies." I started underlining the places where he does this and the it's all over the book. Existence is not separate from embodiment. His body *is* inseparable from his self. His body *is* his self.

When the facts of your body put your body in danger, you don't easily forget that life is an embodied thing. You don't easily forget that *you* will be equated with your body, judged by others' perceptions of your body, and it is often your body that will experience the consequences of others' judgments.

As a woman walking through the world, you don't forget your body without effort, or intention.

Creation, no matter how it happened, is potential materialized ... word become flesh. And we encounter it with our senses.

"The hour is very, very late. And what we need," says mythologist Martin Shaw, "is a great, powerful, tremulous falling back in love with our old, ancient, primordial Beloved, which is the Earth herself."

I invite you to come to me after the service if you would like to have a little golden jingle shell, or a teeny, tiny conch. You need not attach any particular message to the shell, with the hope that as you let the shell be the shell, you may let you be you. Beautifully embodied. Exquisite and gold. Enough just as it is. Enough, just as you are. Amen.