

Four Small Things

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
On Pollinator Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC
June 24, 2018
Text: Proverbs 30:24-28

*Just what makes that little old ant
Think he'll move that rubber tree plant
Anyone knows an ant can't
Move a rubber tree plant
But he's got high hopes
He's got high hopes
He's got high apple pie in the sky hopes
So any time you're gettin' low
'Stead of lettin' go, just remember that ant
Oops, there goes another rubber tree plant ...*

Don't you just love this song? Do you remember it? I do, from when I was a very little girl. Do you remember who sang it first? [Frank Sinatra] Do you remember what year? [1959 when it was the theme song of the movie, *A Hole in the Head* in which Sinatra was paired with child actor Eddie Hodges. The most well-known version with a children's chorus backing Sinatra was recorded in 1961.] Okay, here's the big question – which Presidential election campaign adopted this as their campaign song with slightly different lyrics? [John F. Kennedy] It's also currently on television again as the background music for a commercial for Lipton Tea!! The commercial's message is that Americans are inherently optimistic, at least according to the commercial.

Perhaps that's why I have always loved this song, because I know I am inherently optimistic. In fact, friends and family have at times called me annoyingly optimistic. By now most of you who have known me as your pastor for these past six years know that I am someone who always looks on the bright side, always looks for the silver lining in that cloud up ahead, always assumes there is an answer to be found to whatever problem is encountered. I think we all want to be optimistic, especially these days when there is SO much negative news all the time. The heart-breaking images and sounds of innocent immigrant families suffering wrenching separations, confusion and terror at the hands of US officials has certainly dominated every form of news media this week. So too the escalating trade wars and the riots in Pittsburgh, my hometown, in the aftermath of another police shooting of an unarmed black youth. Add to this our own personal worries about health concerns, shifting financial situations and the difficulties faced by family and friends that draw us in and it's no wonder optimism is in such short supply. We need those high hopes of the ant and the rubber tree plant badly!

That's why I was so delighted as I was searching for appropriate biblical texts for Pollinator Sunday and found today's text from Proverbs. I really loved this text which clearly sees in four small critters a special and unique value given them by God.

The writer of this part of Proverbs is emphasizing that what matters most in life is not size or power or strength. What matters is wisdom and this wisdom, he writes, is uniquely present in “four small things.” The first is an ant. A collection of ants to be precise. Interestingly, he refers to the random ant colony he is describing as people, not insects or creatures or anything else. He calls them people, precisely so we, the reader, has no difficulty making the connection to ourselves he wants us to make. Ants are seemingly tiny and insignificant, easily stepped on and totally without strength to protect themselves from such random human actions. And yet, they are always successful in feeding their own. They are wise enough, smart enough, to survive and thrive in spite of their lack of physical strength.

So too the next of the four small things – a badger, curiously enough. This critter is described again in human terms, as a “people without power.” I admit this one is rather strange since I don’t think of a badger as powerless. I certainly would not want to have face one down while I was walking my dog. And yet, faced by an armed human, the badger wouldn’t stand a chance. But, the Proverbs’ writer points out, the badger is wise enough to make his home where it would be virtually impossible for a human to chase him – in a cleft of rocks where the badger could hide easily, confounding any attempts to reach in and grab him. Again,

wisdom triumphs over power. The badger outsmarts his adversaries by his ability to hide in the rocks.

The third “small thing” is another insect – this time a locust – and again the description is a curious one. “The locusts have no king” and yet they all march in rank. I for one have never thought of locusts as marching in rank like a phalanx of soldiers led into battle by a king. But, the locusts can easily confound human efforts to contain them by their sheer numbers when they come in force in search of food. The expression “a horde of locusts” describes a real phenomenon in which these insects, members of the grasshopper family, can strip a field of grain in a matter of minutes. Therefore, it would seem that our friend writing Proverbs sees their wisdom as their ability to recognize and use the strength of coming together to achieve a common goal. Again, wisdom is not reliant on size or strength or power of the individual critter. A horde of locusts is a scary thing – one of the Ten Plagues God used to convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. And that makes sense, doesn’t it? Perhaps the Proverbs writer also wants to remind us that God can use anything, any critter, any situation, to accomplish God’s plans.

And finally, the last of the four small things – a lizard. I freely admit I am not a lizard person. I am not a reptile person. I don’t have anything against them per se. They’re just not my idea of a pet. But that’s not what’s intended here anyway. Here the

writer is again emphasizing the wisdom of this little critter which anyone can pick up in their hand (if they were inclined to do so, that is) and presumably toss aside easily. Yet, this critter so easily disposed of still lives in the palaces of kings. Even the wealthiest of humans, with servants to keep the house clean and soldiers to protect them at every turn, can't keep these little critters from finding a way in to the palace. They are too smart, too wise in the ways of humans so they can sneak right past them. Too wise in their knowledge of nooks and crannies where it's easy to hide. These little critters are wise enough to outsmart anyone in order to be where they want to be.

I think you can see now why I found this short text from Proverbs so compelling as I considered different texts for today which is Pollinator Sunday. This is a real thing, by the way. Pollinator Week runs from June 18-24, making today the official Pollinator Sunday. Overseen by an international non-profit organization called the Pollinator Partnership, Pollinator Week has been observed since 2007. It is a time specifically devoted to getting out the word about pollinators through this international celebration of the valuable ecosystem services provided by bees, birds, butterflies, bats and beetles. As you know, we as a church have been working to establish our church grounds as a pollinator friendly habitat for the past several years. Many of you have seen and studied the concept drawing of our dream to develop the

property. Copies of that plan are available for you to study again today. You know that the meadow component of the gardens planned for the upper lawn has been cultivated and we are waiting for the growth of wildflowers and meadow grasses we hope is coming. This weekend, work has also begun on the demonstration Rain Garden on another portion of the upper lawn. Plans to install the labyrinth on the upper quadrant of the upper lawn by the end of the summer are underway and we hope to have it installed by sometime this fall. Additional plans call for a Peace Pole garden in the glen on the far side of the driveway to the lower parking lot. And we are still dreaming, imagining what we can do to transform all of our property and indeed the church itself into a center for the protection of and education about the crucial role in our lives held by pollinators of all sorts.

The simple truth is that the Pollinator Garden is a growing, vital ministry of this church. Like the four small things from Proverbs, the Pollinator Gardens project offers us four small things from which our wisdom and purpose as a church can grow. First, this is an eco-justice ministry in which we are living out the biblical mandate to care for Creation that goes all the way back to Genesis. Make no mistake, God entrusted Creation – including these tiny pollinators – to our safekeeping. Contrary to what some want to believe, God did NOT give us the wonders of Creation to exploit solely for the benefit of humankind. God

trusted us with the responsibility of loving the earth and everything in it as God does. Far too often we humans have failed miserably at this as exploitation for profit and convenience too often determines decisions made. Thus, our humble Pollinator Gardens project is one small attempt to demonstrate that we have the strength to make right a grievous sin.

Second, our Pollinator Gardens project is a powerful witness to the community in which we are located that we take seriously our mandate from God to love God's Creation as God loves it. We are proclaiming our faith in God and demonstrating that we know we have the power to exercise our responsibility for the sanctity of God's Creation in every shovelful of dirt turned over, every seed planted and watered, every bee and butterfly fed. Our work on this project is truly faith in action, visible to the entire community.

Third, our Pollinator Gardens project offers us a tremendous tool and opportunity for community outreach, to make our church known for what it is – a loving and committed group of Christians working together to answer God's call to make a difference in this world as we best as we are able. Did you know that we are partnering with all sorts of groups and individuals within the community, people who would never have even known about our church except for the Pollinator Gardens? The local Wild Ones chapter, the Stonington Beautification Committee, the Eastern Connecticut Water Conservation District, the folks who came to

the Rain Garden workshop we hosted this past spring, the folks who will come to the Rain Barrel workshop to be held here in the next few weeks. Let's not forget all the people in the Stonington Community Facebook Group who respond enthusiastically to all the news about the gardens we share with them. And, there's all the folks straining to see what we're doing "out there" every time they drive by. People in this community know who we are – that funky modern church with the pollinator gardens.

And that brings me to our fourth small thing which isn't so small at all. The Pollinator Gardens have rejuvenated this church. The deep sense of reverence for God and God's Creation which is at the heart of this project has seeped into every aspect of how we function as a church. These gardens have given us a new purpose, a new mission and a new sense of self as a church making a real and tangible difference in our community and in the world. Whether you've worked in the gardens for hours on end or just admired them as you've walked into the building or driven by, you are a part of this miraculous transformation of our church into a new version of what it has always striven to be – that beacon of hope in our community and the world. Thanks to bees and butterflies, bats and beetles, and the ecosystem we are creating to sustain them – that is exactly what we are – hope alive and growing. Just like that ant with the rubber tree plant – we've got high hopes! And they are here to stay. May God guide us forward

as our own four small things continue to take root and grow.
Amen.