

In this beautiful world, we are surrounded by and are part of incredibly complex and fragile ecosystems. One of the most amazing is the one in which the monarch butterfly lives.

Butterflies are beautiful, and they make a wonderful symbol of our faith, with their transformation from caterpillar, to chrysalis to elegant winged creature. But the monarch is amazing in some special ways. Every year, the monarch butterflies that live east of the Rocky Mountains make a 2,500-mile migration between their summer breeding grounds in the northern United States and Canada, and their winter retreats in Mexico. No other insect is known to travel such distances. And here's the really cool thing, the butterflies successfully make their way to their Mexican habitats—the same 13 small wintering sites scattered over an area just 75 by 35 miles—*having never been there before*. The butterflies that leave Mexico to fly back north in the spring are the great-grandparents of the ones that will return in the fall—several life cycles later. They rely on navigational data programmed genetically into their tiny butterfly brains.

On that journey, the monarch functions as a vital pollinator for the plant life that sustains so much other life, all along its route.

Monarchs rely on those particular wintering grounds, which have the exact right, altitude, the exact right temperature, and the exact right moisture. They also rely on a particular food when they are in their larval stage, the milkweed plant. Milkweed contains bitter poisons that the plant developed to protect itself from insect predators. But the monarch also adapted, not only to be able to eat the plant, but to use the poison in the plant to strengthen its own defenses so it can't be eaten by birds. That colorful pattern which we admire so much functions as a red light to animals who might otherwise imagine that fluttery little insect might make a good snack.

The problem for the monarch, is that both their winter grounds and their primary food source, the milkweed, are being challenged by human activity—and the population has been reduced from over billion beautiful butterflies, to just under 100 million.

That's just one example of how this vital, interconnected, web of life is so important, and yet so easily put at risk, if just one or two significant elements of the system are threatened.

Jesus is attending to the complex, fragile community that he has been busy trying to shape as he prepares to make his turn toward Jerusalem, and the cross. Jesus knows what's ahead, and he's trying to tell the disciples. Two times already he has described for them his passion—that he will be handed over, suffer die and on the third day be raised. But the disciples aren't getting it, they aren't able to hear such a message

In fact, having just gotten a lesson on servanthood and the valuable and vital position of last place, they have come to Jesus with a complaint. “Teeeee-cher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he was not following us.” Of course, I'm guessing a little about the whiney tone. The disciples are trying to do a little boundary maintenance, some line drawing. They are trying to make some determinations about who is “us” and who is “them.” Who is in and who is out. Who knows how to do this stuff the “right” way and who might just be a pretender or hanger-on.

But Jesus isn't having anything to do with that. He tells them that whoever acts in his name will soon be on board, if they are not already. “Because whoever is not against us is for us.” Jesus wants a bigger circle, more participants, more helpers, more caring for the vulnerable, a more generous understanding of what it means to be one of his followers, more proclaimers of the good news. More.

That's surely the lesson Moses was trying to pass along.

In our first reading we hear Moses venting a little bit to God. It sounds like he's had it up to here, as my Mother would say. Another round of complaining from the wilderness travelers. It seems the ever-present manna, source of sustaining life from God, is getting old. The complaining leads to another occasion for God to be angry, and Moses just lets it rip. "Did I conceive all this people? Did I give birth to them? If this is the way you are going to treat me, God, put me to death at once!"

God responds to Moses' need, as indeed God always does. He has him gather 70 of the elders of the people of Israel at the tent of the meeting, and he puts a little of Moses spirit on all of them, so they can take on some of the job, for a little while. But curiously, two characters in this story, Eldad and Medad didn't go out to the tent, they stayed in the camp. But some of the spirit also rested on them, and so they prophesied as well. Someone ran and told Moses, and Moses' assistant Joshua wants him to put an immediate stop to it. After all, they're unauthorized, not vetted, not properly trained. This can't be right! This must stop. But Moses, as Jesus will do later, recognizes the value of a bigger circle, more participants, more helpers, more caring for the vulnerable, a more generous understanding of what it means to follow God, more proclaimers of God's word. More.

Jesus, having just recommended that strategy of more followers, more proclaimers, more people doing good in his name, reminds the disciples of the importance of caring for one another. He knows that later, people will help them, with a cup of cold water, a place to stay, financial support for those proclaiming the way of Jesus, a word of prayer. That's all good and important and vital.

More helpers is good, a bigger community is good, more care for those in need is good. And Jesus wants to be sure the disciples don't get in the way or otherwise do anything to damage

this growing commitment to following Jesus. Not in the way of anyone else. Not in their own way.

Jesus wants them to know that their actions matter. Their behavior has consequences. That creating and building a community can be tricky business. That a gathered assembly of followers can be a delicate and fragile ecosystem, which broken in a few seemingly small places can fall apart in a big way.

He uses pretty dramatic language to tell them that they don't want to get in the way of anyone else's journey of faith, most especially not in the way of those weakest and most vulnerable. Better a millstone were hung about their necks and they were thrown into the sea. And they don't want to get in their own way. Not by their own hand, their own foot, or their own eye.

Better that they rid themselves of anything that would be an obstacle to faith, their own or another's.

I sometimes think we underestimate how much our actions, words, or deeds, have an impact on those around us. An impact on those who are looking to us to see what this way of faithful living looks like. Children, our own or those of our faith community. New believers, wondering about what it means to be a member of a church. Returning believers, people trying to find a way of faithful living that might be shaped differently than the way they learned at an earlier stage in life. People trying to find a way out of their own brokenness and pain, hoping that they can find mentors for a life of hope and healing.

They're watching us and learning from us, learning from the ways we live out our call to discipleship well, and learning just as much or more sometimes from the ways we do it badly.

We confessed today that we sometimes don't let God's grace set us free. We receive God's promise as a word of grace for us, but expect others to earn it. That sometimes, perhaps from fear, perhaps from selfishness, our impulse is to turn the church inward for ourselves, rather than outward for others. And sometimes we act as though we don't think we are good enough to be called a child of God.

In ways they certainly can't understand at this point in the story, Jesus is preparing his disciples to be the church once he is gone, to be his hands and feet in the world. And he knows that others will be looking to them to help show what it means to follow Jesus. He wants them to live out their faith fully, to be salt for the world and to be at peace with one another.

Life together in a community of faith can be challenging at times. After all, there's a lot at stake. We are more than just a gathered group of people with a common interest or a shared hobby. We are here because of a shared conviction about matters of fundamental importance, because of our conviction that God has created us, Jesus has redeemed us and the Spirit calls us into the world as followers of Jesus. Most of all, we trust that we are here because God has brought us here.

Each of us play a role in the health and well-being of this community and in the larger body of Christ. How do we talk about our church? How do we talk about the members of our church, the leaders of our church? How do we talk about other brothers and sisters doing the work of God in other churches? In other denominations? We are tasked, each of us, with the responsibility of nurturing and caring for the body of Christ which is God's church in the world.

Living and working together as this particular faith community is helped when we trust one another and act out of the belief that each one of us is seeking to be faithful to God. We are helped by a first impulse of kindness, care and support. We are helped when we understand that

we each share in the work of the Spirit. We are helped by a generous understanding of what the Spirit is doing, and who the Spirit will do it through. And we are helped when we remember that we are none of us in charge. We are not the leaders, we are not the ones with the best, right way. We are each of us followers. And Jesus is out ahead of us, seeking to show us the way.

And when we fail at this sometimes delicate and tricky task of being community together, we are reminded each week that we have the means to begin anew. We confess our brokenness. And as a community together, we hear God's word of forgiveness. A word that makes us new, that restores us and that allows us to find our place, at the back of the line, in last place, following the one who is our reason for being, our source of renewal our hope and our guide.

This complex and very special ecosystem is an important part of how each of us live into the faith to which God has called us. We have a responsibility to nurture this community, but we also know that because of what God does for us in Jesus Christ, it can always be made whole again.

Amen?