

Be a Goose

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Where there is no vision, the people perish. —Proverbs 29:18

Invitation to Worship: from “Wild Geese,” by Mary Oliver

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of rain are moving across the landscapes,

Over the prairies and the deep trees, the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination,

Calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—

Over and over announcing your place in the family of things.

Ancient Witness: 1 Corinthians 12:1, 12-20

Now, dear sisters and brothers, I want to instruct you on the matter of spiritual gifts.

The body is one, even though it has many parts; all the parts—many though they are—comprise a single body. And so it is with Christ. It was by one Spirit that all of us, whether we are Jews or Greeks, slaves or citizens, were baptized into one body. All of us have been given to drink of the one Spirit. And that Body is not one part; it is many.

If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” does that make it any less a part of the body? If the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” would that make it any less a part of the body? If the body were all eye, what would happen to our hearing? If it were all ear, what would happen to our sense of smell? Instead of that, God put all the different parts into one body on purpose. If all the parts were alike, where would the body be?

There are, indeed, many different members but one body.

It was a cold, grey morning. The sun was just coming up, so it was dusk—quiet and still. I was walking along when suddenly from the ground arose this great mass of beating wings. And my heart stopped until I recognized this for what it was—a great flock of birds.

I stood there for a moment and watched them before I got into my car. It was amazing. They quickly rose, made a sharp turn, and flew around the big tree. Then they veered directly toward me, flew over the houses and then were gone. It was almost as if they were tied to each other with string, the way they moved. The way they turned and dipped, this looked like a single creature—like a super-agile stream of protoplasm in the air. It was incredible how they moved together like one body, the way they knew where the other ones were going. They *were* connected, somehow, in order to move like that—fluid and graceful. It was like a beautiful dance—choreographed by an invisible hand and faithfully practiced.

It was Paul, in the Christian New Testament, who often spoke of the church as if it were one body. This is a wonderful image. But it is so far from our Western lifestyle that it may no longer make any sense for us. We are such a highly individualistic society.

And I suppose that it might be easier for us to imagine ourselves as a flock of birds, the ultimate symbol of freedom, than as a mere body part such as a blood cell, which wouldn't survive or even make sense without the rest of the body.

In Eastern or ancient Jewish thought, there was no problem with the image of the body, because for them, the emphasis was always upon the community and not upon the individuals. It was Western thought that turned this upside down and emphasized the individual soul. So perhaps a flock of birds is easier for us Western thinkers to comprehend. It is true that we are all distinct, separate individuals, to be sure. But we are also so much more. Indeed, we depend upon the rest of the flock for protection, nurture and survival.

You know, as a Pastor, I have two major concerns. First, the spiritual development of each person of this flock—the path of awakening that each of us is traveling, which includes the death of the small self, the ego, and the emergence of the larger, more expansive self—the birth of the Christ Consciousness or Buddha Nature within us.

Second, I'm concerned with the vitality and well-being of the congregation as a whole, as a single entity and organization, as a body. This is my focus this morning.

Paul shared these concerns, too, and among other things, was an organizer; he was an administrator. And much of what he had to say to the churches, past and present, had to do with principles of organization. Implicit in what Paul said was a very helpful and practical theory of management that organizations and churches have been discovering on their own for years.

Each organization, including a church, runs on motives which are directed toward goals. Without goals there are no motives, and things come to a stop. Sometimes the goals are explicit; sometimes they are implicit.

And when the achievement or attainment of these goals is thwarted, you have what is called *goal frustration*. When this happens, organizational theorists say that this frustration shows itself in a number of ways: aggression, rationalization (excuses), regression, fixation, and resignation. I am sure that you have seen the results of goal frustration yourselves in organizations, in other people, in churches, maybe even in yourself.

And there are several other interesting things about goals. For example, people are not highly motivated if a goal is seen as almost impossible, on one hand, or virtually certain to achieve, on the other hand. The best goals are not too hard or too easy. Of these two, the most common mistake is to set unrealistic, impossible goals, rather than those that are too easy. Then there is frustration, and motivation goes down.

Organizations need success—they need victories—if they are going to thrive.

And so first, there must be a goal, and the best goals are *specific, achievable* and *measurable*. Church growth guru, Lyle Schaller called this the SAM method. And not having these kinds of goals is simply setting oneself up for a fall.

I believe that the reason why most New Year's resolutions fall flat on their faces is that they are much too vague—they are too long-term, unachievable and not measurable. Then what happens is that there is no sense of success, of achievement. And motivation goes down, and we forget about it until next year.

Another thing about a good goal is that it must be integrated within the organization. For example, the goals of management and the goals of the workers need to be close together for what they call “greater organizational accomplishment.”

So let's say that the goals of a parent, representing management, of course, are that her child becomes a rocket scientist and Nobel peace Prize winner. And let's say the child's goals are to wear radical clothes and have plenty of dates. Now, no matter what happens, there is not going to be much “organizational accomplishment.” No matters what happens, someone (or both) is going to be unhappy.

Now, all this about goals is important and useful for all organizations: families, businesses, governments. But this is especially important to that unique organization called the church. Why?

Well, first, a church is a completely voluntary organization. Nobody pays anyone to be a church member. There is no coercion, there is no control over its members. They can come and go as they please.

Second, it is a highly democratic organization. We don't have a management who decides what we are going to do, and then have workers who carry it out. In a church, everyone is both management and worker.

So for a church it is particularly important to follow the principles of good goals. And it seems the more we study this area, the more we realize that Paul knew what he was talking about. A church must know where it is going; it must have goals, and it must move together in harmony as if it were a single entity to accomplish those goals.

In Proverbs it says, “where there is no vision, the people perish.” And by vision, I would mean a clear, specific, achievable and measurable vision. It would need to be a common vision, a shared vision, or as the experts might say, a vision for organizational accomplishment.

You know, if you go into a daycare, you will notice something about the younger children that is called “parallel play.” The mantra is “you don’t mess with me, and I won’t mess with you.” And that might be a harmonious situation, but that’s not a model for an effective, enduring and vital spiritual community. In a congregation, *we often will need to let go of or defer our own personal desires and goals for the goals and the vision of the group.*

Look, I know that we are all individuals here. We each have our own goals and vision. But we need more. We cannot afford to have each of us merely fly off in a different direction. It is imperative to have a clear, common vision to move together, to be joined as a single body and knit together. Sure, we have individual lives, but as a church we must work *together*, moving in unison and coordination, as if some invisible hand has choreographed us into a beautiful dance.

Through the years I’ve heard many church growth specialists say that vital, healthy congregations are those where people *own* and *can articulate* their church’s vision for ministry. Conversely, visionless congregations often fail to experience spiritual and numerical growth.

What is a vision? It is a clear, distinctive, unique mental image given to a church. It is like a fingerprint; no two are alike. “Each church,” writes one specialist, “has been called into existence to reach a different group of people and to have a unique influence on the culture.”

Lily Tomlin once said, “I always wanted to be somebody, but now I realize I should have been more specific.” As a congregation, we need to be more specific!

It will take time, but I believe that it is absolutely vital for this congregation to discover and articulate its unique vision.

We’ve established a Long Range Planning Committee that we’ve dubbed The Dreamin’ Team that has begun work to lead this congregation in this work. And you’ll hear more about this in the coming weeks and months.

Now, to use Paul’s language, North Congregational U.C.C. is not *the* body. We are *a* body that is merely a part of the larger whole. We are bodies within bodies within bodies, all within the one Body of God. This is an important spiritual insight. We inhabit many bodies. We are people within spiritual communities within spiritual traditions, all within the Sacred Presence. It is a common mistake of a congregation to lose sight of this and to try to “be all things to all people.” The good news is that we don’t have to. There are other spiritual communities that we complement and that complement us. Together, we are part of a larger body; we don’t have to be the whole thing.

This awareness frees us and makes us more effective. As a congregation we have a finite amount of energy and resources. The more we can focus our efforts the more successful we will be. If we work at pulling more and more in the same direction, the more effective we will be.

What direction is that? That's something for us to continue to discover together. A good vision will enable a congregation to say "no" to some things in order to more fully say "yes" to other things.

When I was in Minnesota, every once in a while I'd hear this loud and brassy honk from overhead, then there they'd be—this flock of geese. Have you ever noticed a flock of geese flying south, how they fly in a "V" formation? There is a reason that they do this. What is interesting is that they can fly a lot further as a group than they can individually—over twice as far. They ride each other's draft and take turns flying in the lead.

The leader drops out and that spot is promptly filled by one that was behind without missing a beat. They share the load! There is cooperation and interdependence. Each goose accepts responsibility to participate, to pull its own weight. Each is committed to the journey, to seeing it through, to the effort it takes. And they honk, as if to give encouragement to keep up their speed and not give up.

I don't think what they're saying is "Man, I am not happy right now. I swear, if some things don't change I am seriously thinking about joining another flock." No, the English translation is probably, "C'mon. Keep it up! Isn't this great! Tally Ho!"

And so as a church, we too, need to have a direction, an identity, a destination, a focus that comes to a point like a "V," if we are going to get where we want to go.

Bob Stromberg once wrote a little piece titled, "Why Geese Fly Farther Than Eagles."

*For though the eagle is stronger in the fight,
More fit to kill,
My goose can fly farther and longer
Than any eagle will.*

He had a chance to observe them closely when he nursed one injured goose back to health. He wrote,

*So that's how I found out
How the goose can fly from up north
To way down south and back again.
But she cannot do it alone, you see.
It's something that must be done **in community**.*

Eagles are beautiful, but may we be a congregation of geese. Let us discover our vision and follow it together. Because you see, this is how we can go a great distance as a congregation. Stromberg concludes:

*These days it's a popular notion,
And people think of themselves on the eagle-side.
Solitary,*

*Self-sufficient,
Strong.*

*But we are what we are.
That's something we cannot choose.
Though many would wish to be seen as an eagle,
I think God made most like the goose.*

So come on, let's get together; we have a long way to go. Tally ho!

(NOTE: The spoken sermon, also available online, may differ slightly in phrasing and detail from this manuscript version.)