

“Butterflies and Bees”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
September 19, 2021 – Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 20
James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

“I float like a butterfly and sting like a bee!” This was, according to boxing legend Muhammad Ali, what made him such a uniquely formidable opponent in the ring. According to Ali, because his unique combination of agility and power, he wasn’t just one talented boxer among many, but he was “the greatest,” and he let the world know this many times throughout his career, even releasing a spoken word album entitled “I Am the Greatest” that featured 23-year-old Ali, then named Cassius Clay, reciting these lines:

I Am the Greatest...By Cassius Clay

He talks a great deal and brags indeed-y of a muscular punch that's
incredibly speedy.

The fistic world was dull and weary. With a champ like Liston, things had to
be dreary.

Then someone with color, someone with dash, brought fight fans running
with cash.

This brash, young boxer is something to see. And the heavyweight
championship is his destiny.

This kid's got a left. This kid's got a right. If he hits you once, you're asleep
for the night.

And as you lie on the floor while the ref counts 10, you pray that you won't
have to fight me again.

For I am the man this poem is about, the next champ of the world, there
isn't a doubt.

I am the greatest!¹

¹ Cassius Clay, *I Am the Greatest*, Columbia Records, 1963, LP.

Indeed, he was a truly great champion, not because he said that was, but because he demonstrated excellence in his sport over the course of his career, floating like a butterfly and stinging like a bee.

I bring up Muhammad Ali this morning and his claim to greatness to introduce today's sermon on greatness. In today's gospel lesson, Jesus teaches his disciples about greatness after they were arguing with each other about who among them was the greatest. According to Jesus, what will make any of them or us "the greatest" is not being in first place or becoming a world champion, but being "the last of all and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35). We are taught that humble, sacrificial service to others is what will make a person truly great, even if you cannot float like a butterfly and sting like a bee.

And I think we can we can learn about true greatness from the butterflies and the bees. Though they are but little creatures, butterflies and bees can teach us some big lessons here.

Consider the little butterfly. With its radiant display of color, it instantly beautifies every place into which it flutters. One way to be great is to be like the butterfly in bringing beauty into all of your own relationships and spaces. Perhaps you may need to struggle through metamorphosis for your own colorful wings to be developed, but we believe that through God's indwelling and empowering presence, we are able to do just this. Throughout our lifetimes, from the moments we are as little as young Henry (baptized this day) to the very end of our earthly days, we are enabled to grow as people, especially through our struggles, to become more beautiful, or in the words of our first reading from the epistle of James, we can grow in beautiful, divine wisdom, becoming more "pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy" (James 3:17). We know that there are a lot of ugly spaces in our world devoid of those qualities and desperately in need of them. When you flutter into the ugly spaces or the colorless places and do the beautifying work of God in them, you are being a servant of others and are demonstrating true greatness.

And consider the little bees. Yes, they can sting, but almost all of the time, they're not busy stinging, but are busy working. The bees buzz around and collect nectar and pollen from flowers and other plants to bring back home to the colony

to feed others. And as they buzz around, they move pollen from one plant to another, enabling plants to reproduce. Without the buzzing bees being busy in their business, the cycle of life for many plants would simply cease. By working to feed others and by enabling other living things to reproduce, the little bees give us a big lesson on greatness: When we, like the bees, can use our own energies to enable life to flourish in others, we are being servants of others and demonstrate true greatness.

So let God be at work in you, creating more compassionate, wise beauty within you, especially through those things that make your life difficult or painful. And be at work in the world around you, beautifying the world through peace-making acts of love and efforts to encourage life to grow in people's bodies and spirits. Dear friends, this day, be great like Ali, but in the way of the butterfly and the way of the bee. Amen.