

***Enjoying the Lift, Sharing the Load***  
Text: I Corinthians 12: 4-11; II Corinthians 4: 7

Rev. Dr. C. Geordie Campbell

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**The geese are back in the sky again!** They are beginning their migration to a warmer place for a season. They signal that autumn is well underway now, nearly full, and that it won't be long before winter comes home.

But they tell more than that, too. In fact, a Connecticut-bred pastor by the name of Browne Barr once likened the church - this body of believers of which we are a part - to a flock of geese in the autumn sky. It's a rather playful metaphor to ponder. In particular, he noticed five ways that geese in flight bear a curious resemblance to the church.

(A biblical pause, lest such a thought seem too sketchy. The Apostle Paul almost exclusively used metaphors in speaking of the church. Most noteworthy was his reference to the church as a body with many diverse parts. Later he likened the church to a treasure in an earthen vessel. Still later he spoke of the church as the household of God.)

So look to the sky, let your mind frolic, and simply imagine!

**A first similarity has to do with a peculiar anatomical fact about geese.** And, as long as we're in the fact-check-mode of a political season, I verified this through a Zoologist at the University of California!

Dr. Richard Eakin, Professor Emeritus of Zoology, describes it like this.<sup>1</sup> "Geese have a particular system of open lungs and hollow bones. Air passes through their lungs into a complex matrix of tiny air-sacks that infiltrate their bodies - right down to the marrow of their bones. These air-sacks make them light and buoyant in both air and water. They are upheld not only by the air around them but within them as well."

Well, that buoyancy happens in the church, too. In various ways we talk about being upheld by the Spirit, the ruach Yahweh, the breath of God. And it's true: real living people, some of you here today, have experienced the mystery of being filled in some transforming way. Whether in prayer or song, in the figment of an idea, in the still small voice of quietude, the wind blows where it wills as the empowering presence of God finds its way here.

**A second similarity is that geese rarely fly alone, rather almost always in communities of formation.** They know by instinct that some things in life are best done with others. And though a single goose can fly alone, as any person can live alone, a goose in formation can soar with greater aerodynamic efficiency than any single one could do all by himself. Not just a little bit more mind you, but with an

increased range of 70%!<sup>2</sup> And that's because the principle of lift is multiplied when it's spread across their wings collectively.

I am so very grateful for the experience we've had these past months bringing the Alfajer family to America – land that I love. They fled from Syria to various refugee camps in Jordan, and now West Hartford is their home. None of us alone as individuals or even the congregations with whom we are partnered, could have brought this harvest of hope to fruition. But joining hands and sharing resources increased what I'll call our compassionate efficiency in response to this crisis. What a beautiful thing!

**Third: geese have an intentional way of sharing the lead.** A careful eye will notice that the front position gets passed around. The one at the apex is there for a brief stay and then drops back to the trailing edge. This is because, again, geese know that no one of them can survive facing the full brunt of the wind alone. And they know by instinct when the time comes to relieve the leader.

A few weeks ago Pam and I went to see "Sully"<sup>3</sup> - the movie named for the pilot who landed a severely crippled jetliner on the Hudson River. It is an inspiring story of human triumph. Sully is the hero, and rightly so. It was his amazing skill, knowledge, concentration under extreme pressure and experience that saved the lives of 155 passengers. But he acknowledges that he could not have done it alone. He notes the courage of the passengers in not panicking, the skill and training of his flight crew and co-pilot, and the parade of Tugs, Ferrys and a gaggle of other boats who arrived almost out of nowhere and without whom those waiting to be rescued from the wings would have drowned or died from hypothermia.

It's true in life, true for you, true for me, true for the church right here: everyone shares the responsibility to make things work.

**A fourth likeness is how geese honk out their story and song.** They create an amazing symphony in the sky. Actually it usually sounds pretty random and disorganized. But they do talk to each other.

And more: they have a systematic and intentional pattern of honking. The trailing goose begins, and then a second one follows, and then a third as it moves forward. They honk out their presence to each other. It's their way of reminding each other who they are and giving each some encouragement in the midst of the journey.

I don't want to suggest that what we talk about here sounds like birds honking! But in the things that we say and sing and do we share in what Joseph Sittler once called "the wonderful, complicated, endlessly rich Good News of the Gospel"<sup>4</sup>, and of God's grace and justice, mercy and compassion, forgiveness and love. That's the core narrative of who we are and to whom we belong.

**And then last: geese look after each other.** Some of us live in places where there is something called a neighborhood watch. Well, a careful observer of these feathered

theological friends soon discovers that geese watch out for each other and they keep company with the fallen. When any single bird is injured or exhausted, two geese fall out of the formation and stay with it until it either revives or dies. Then they catch up with the rest of them or join another flock.

So it is with the church. The Gospel encourages us ever to pay special attention to those in need, to the lonely, the hungry, the under-resourced, the misunderstood. And it also helps us to know that all of us, bar none, at some time in our lives, need the special care of another to get us back on our feet.

And so the church: graceful sometimes like a flock in flight, keeping company with the fallen, telling the story, sharing the lead, bearing the journey together, and filled with the spirit.

**So why do I tell you all of this today, you wonder?** Because I love the church; always have, always will. I love it more than geese in the autumn sky! I believe in the church and the essential goodness that she provides – even in all of her imperfections. I love what we share here together, in the heart of this town. And I love what and who we are stretching to become.

Over these next weeks we're going to be asking for your support to ensure that we can continue – and it takes a lot of time, talent and money to keep the pace we have set for ourselves. So pray about it, please. We cannot do without your best giving. Think hard and deep and generous thoughts. Know that we can do great things together only with our collective best.

And then, on November the 6<sup>th</sup>, come to worship with your pledge as together we share the lift together, and the spirit and the song and the load. Amen.

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First Church  
12 South Main Street  
West Hartford, CT 06107

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<sup>1</sup> Browne Barr. High Flying Geese: Unexpected Reflections on the Church and Its Ministry. Seabury Press, 1983, pp. 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> Barr, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Chelsey B. Sullenberger, III and Jeffrey Zaslow. Sully: My Search for What Really Matters: The Untold Story Behind the Miracle on the Hudson. Morrow Books, 2016. I highly recommend Sully's book as an inspiring story of human triumph and accomplishment!

<sup>4</sup> John M. Buchanan, "Class Notes" in Christian Century, February 22, 2003, p. 3.