



Westminster Presbyterian Church

Richard Baker - April 23, 2017 Sermon

Hedgehoging It: Restoring Nature and Being Ourselves Restored By Earth Day

Psalm 104 (selected verses) II Corinthians 5:17-20

What is the biggest, most all-encompassing relationship we have? I would argue that it is with the world around us. And I believe that humanity is suffering from the hedgehog's dilemma in this most vital of bonds. We want to be close to the natural world—I would go so far as to say we need that contact. But if we get too close, we destroy it: we trample it . . . And if we retreat from the natural world, into cities or industrialized agricultural landscapes, we become bereft, lonely. We become so disconnected from our roots that we easily forget the value of the natural world and accelerate its destruction. The dilemma we face is in trying to get close enough to the wild without corrupting it out of existence.—Hugh Warwick, *The Hedgehog's Dilemma: A Tale of Obsession, Nostalgia, and the World's Most Charming Mammal*

Major Hedgehog passed away earlier this month, at the age of 86, having lived, by every account, a good, happy, long, and useful human life. A life, I think, that tells us much about what our relationship with the natural world should be, and what our relationship with God is through Jesus Christ.

Just in case you missed the obituaries, Major Hedgehog's given name was Adrian Coles; he was an Englishman who lived most of his life in the village of Clee Hill in the Shropshire region of England; active in local government, the Major served on several county, district and parish councils, including Shropshire County Council and the Caynham Parish Council, in fact, he served on the latter for more than thirty-nine years, and was chairman for fourteen. And yes, he was in fact a major in the British army, on active duty for twenty-five years, first in ordnance and then as a parachutist.

He went from being Major Coles to being Major Hedgehog because one day, way back in 1982, his young daughter ran in to tell him that a hedgehog was trapped in the cattle grid at the end of their lane. (A cattle grid—or guard as we call them—is a depression in the road covered by transverse bars usually made of metal. The bars are close enough together to allow vehicles to drive over them, but far enough apart to discourage cattle and other livestock from walking across them. But they are also far enough apart to allow a hedgehog to fall through them and get trapped, which is precisely what happened at the end of the Coles' lane.) Using a pan and sticks, Coles and his daughter managed to free this particular hedgehog. But, with a little asking around and some research, Coles learned that hedgehogs were fast disappearing from England, victims of suburbanization, pesticide poisoning, being run over by cars, and yes, getting trapped in cattle grids. This was disheartening to Coles because . . . well, let me say a few words about hedgehogs.

Hedgehogs are native to England, Europe, and Asia but not to North America. They have little pointy, turned-up noses, shiny black eyes, and they are covered with spines or spikes (five to seven thousand on an adult, each one about 10 inches long). On this last point, they bear some resemblance to our North American porcupines, but there the resemblance ends: porcupines are rodents, much larger (2-3 feet long with ten-inch tails), and are mainly herbivores—eating tree bark and roots, berries, springtime buds and fruit. Whereas hedgehogs are placental mammals—which means that they have fur, give birth to live young, and feed them with milk from mammary glands; much smaller (only 7-12 inches long), they are insectivores—meaning that they eat insects, especially things like slugs and woodlice that are the bane of every gardener.

But it's much more than their usefulness, hedgehogs, have a certain. . . well, the old English word is doughtiness—which means pluck, persistence, and even a certain kind of homely beauty, and is best

captured by a line from the ancient Greek poet Archilochus, who wrote that “the fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.” Which at the literal level means that, while the fox may know all kinds of tricks, the hedgehog knows one—that is, how to roll up into a ball with all his spikes spiked outwards, which one thing is enough to foil the fox. That’s the literal meaning, take the metaphorical where you will, as people have been doing for twenty-seven centuries.

Inspired, the Major designed a little corner ramp for a cattle grid, made of concrete or wood and at an angle of 20°, which a hedgehog could use to scramble out. He then persuaded the county council (he was after all its chairman) to install them in all Shropshire county cattle grids, and in fact, they are now compulsory on public roads throughout England. But the Major was just getting started: he founded the British Hedgehog Preservation Society which today boasts more than 11,000 members, including 700 “carers” who provide an injured hedgehog with a hot-water bottle and a warm box, or put the small pink feet in splints. The Major talked regularly on the BBC about hedgehogs, advised vets, and lobbied Parliament. At one point, he even sat next to the queen for lunch and was asked to offer the loyal toast. So Major Coles became Major Hedgehog. There’s a picture of him in the *Shropshire Star*, seated, resplendent in his Red army Coat, stripes on the sleeve medals on his chest, medallion around his neck, holding a little hedgehog on his lap in his white-gloved hands.

It’s all just so . . . so . . . well, what’s the word I want? . . . , an almost comic combination of moral earnestness and whimsical invention; of compassion, almost sentimentality, combined with stiff-upper-lipped practicality, of love of nature in the wild combined with love of the domesticated garden, of social distinction and ceremony combined with egalitarian efforts at societal improvement . . . it’s all just so . . . British.

But by now, I’m sure a question has occurred to you, a question that pretty soon occurs to everybody who thinks about hedgehogs, namely, how are they able to enjoy family life? Remember they’re mammals: so the conception, birth (they are born with their spikes), and maternal feeding of baby hedgehogs would seem to be a very prickly, if not impossible, affair. (Remember: those spikes are ten inches long!) The biological answers to these questions are fascinating; the metaphorical extensions of the problem itself, even more so.

Arthur Schopenhauer, a 19th-century German philosopher, called it the “hedgehog dilemma,” and applied it to all human-to-human relationships: how do we get close enough to fulfill our natures but not so close so as to hurt, and even destroy, each other? And Hugh Warwick extends it even farther to the relationship between human beings and the natural world. (I put the quotation on the front of your bulletins.) He says:

We want to be close to the natural world . . . we need that contact. But if we get too close, we destroy it: we trample it . . . And if we retreat from the natural world, into cities or industrialized agricultural landscapes, we become bereft, lonely. We become so disconnected from our roots that we easily forget the value of the natural world and accelerate its destruction.

The dilemma we face—another version of the hedgehog dilemma, according to Warwick—is to get close enough to the natural world to connect with it, to care for it, without getting so close that we corrupt it out of existence. So how do we navigate this dilemma? How do we get close enough without getting too close? Well, we couldn’t ask for a better model than Major Hedgehog.

The Major cared for hedgehogs without getting so close as to rob them of their wildness. If you want to see what robbing them of their wildness looks like, you need look no farther than IHOG—yes, IHOG, I-H-O-G, which stands for the International Hedgehog Olympic Games (yes, there really is such a thing), in which pet hedgehogs compete in running, jumping, swimming, and climbing events (no, I’m not making this up). The Major took a dim view of IHOG, refusing to lend his endorsement to it. To him, hedgehogs were wild creatures, and the best way for humans to care for them was to restore them to the wild—living in harmony with human beings, but not as mere extensions of the human world. But given humans’ place and role in nature and the world, there is a need for us to care for them—that’s what Major Hedgehog saw and responded to so beautifully. Not to care for them at all, simply to retreat into our cities or industrialized agricultural landscapes, not caring what was happening to hedgehogs or any wild thing except insofar as it immediately serves a certain narrow subset of our wants and desires—that

would be to push them towards extinction, to make them victims of encroaching suburbanization, pesticides, automobiles, and cattle grids. In fact, not to care would be a profound vocational failure.

You, knew, we Presbyterians talk a lot about vocation, and rightly so. A vocation (or a calling) is a task—not necessarily your 9-5 job, or your occupation or your career, although it could be—but a task that God not only calls you to do, but also prepares and equips you to do. Everyone has multiple vocations throughout his or her life, some big, some small—and even to speak of big and small may be to adopt the standards of the world, and thereby miss the God-given importance of every calling. A person's being called to this particular act of care, kindness, and service may be—no, it is—the biggest thing in the world, even it is goes entirely unnoticed by the world. (Every calling is the most important calling in the world, just like every baby is the most beautiful baby in the world—both are precious gifts from God, and if you don't know what I mean, I'm sorry.) And it's not just individuals who have vocations—all kinds of groups, families, communities, businesses, churches, nations have them, too. Major Hedgehog's vocation (and I'm sure he had many, including father, soldier, and civic leader, but I'm speaking of his vocation as Major Hedgehog) was to care for hedgehogs. A vocation, Frederick Buechner said, is “where the world's deep need meets your deep joy”—precisely so with the Major. And yet, while acknowledging the profuse abundance of vocations, it's worth noting that the first human vocation, the primordial one, the one God gave to Adam and Eve, was to take care of the earth and all its creatures—to be gardeners.

“The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it”—so says Genesis 2:15. Our first vocation is to be caretakers—or to use the old Biblical word, stewards—of the earth. Not owners—ownership belongs to God—but stewards acting on behalf of the owner. We are meant to take care of the natural world for God, that is our special calling, the task we have been uniquely gifted to do. But lest we take too much pride in that calling and its corresponding power, remember that it brings with it a unique risk, namely, that we human beings can do more harm to the earth and its creatures than any other creature.

But not all of the earth is our garden. There is a wildness to things—a wildness that shows that creation belongs first to God, and that, ultimately, it is in God's power, not ours. That's what Psalm 104 is getting at:

O Lord, how manifold are your works!
In wisdom you have made them all;
the earth is full of your creatures.

The high mountains are for the wild goats;
the rocks are a refuge for the coney.
You make darkness, and it is night,
when all the animals of the forest come creeping out.
The young lions roar for their prey,
seeking their food from God.

Our shared human vocation is to both care for, and to respect the wildness of, God's world. So, if we are to fulfill our vocation, and thereby to navigate our version of the Hedgehog's Dilemma, we need both gardens and wilderness, both city parks and national parks, both backyards and wilderness preserves.

And fulfilling this human vocation has never been more urgent and more challenging than it is today. Human-caused environmental damage is not unique to our modern, industrialized world. As long we have been fallen human beings, we have done damage to the natural world—water pollution, overgrazing, exhausted soil, deforestation, human-caused fire and flood, to cite only a few examples. Human-caused environmental damage is nothing new. What is new is the number of ways we might damage our environment and the complexity of those ways. What is new is the possible scope, duration, and extent of such damage. With industrialization and globalization, human-caused environmental damage goes from being (1) a local phenomenon which, if not entirely reversible with time, was at least not permanent, to (2) a global occurrence from which the earth may never recover. Now please note I did say, “may.” I realize that some of these questions are debatable. Perhaps some of the doomsday scenarios about climate change are speculative and even overwrought.

Perhaps. But given the possible scope, extent, and duration of such damage, do we really want to find out? And this much cannot be debated: with our increased power over nature, comes the increased risk of our harming the natural world in unprecedented ways and to an unprecedented extent. Hence today more than ever, we are all called to care for the earth, in one way or another and in so many different ways (we can each have many, many sub-vocations under one larger one). Our shared, larger vocation to care for the earth is more urgent and more challenging than ever before.

But the risk of my speaking this way—speaking of an imminent and urgent threat not just to nature’s well-being but to our human survival—is that we care for the natural world only because it feeds and sustains us, and not for its own sake. But the truth is, that it is valuable for its own sake, in and of itself, because it is God’s world; God made it, and therefore it is precious. The advice that Hugh Warwick gives for picking up a hedgehog—“Go gently, always gently, these are precious creatures to be treated with great respect”—applies to all of us, for all of creation.

And so God goes gently, always gently, with us, too. You can see it, can’t you? That with regard to fallen human beings God also faces a version of the hedgehog’s dilemma: if God comes too close to us, God overwhelms us, obliterates our humanity. (“See God and die,” the Scripture says.) But if God stays in heaven, leaving us to destroy ourselves and our world with our pesticides and our automobiles, our weapons and our arrogance, our overweening pride and insatiable lusts, then God loses something infinitely precious to God, namely, us and our world. So how does God navigate this version of the hedgehog’s dilemma? By coming to us fully human and fully God, thereby not obliterating our humanity but honoring it, respecting it—even to the point of dying a human death, an awful human death, and so allowing us to become fully human.

And how do we do that today—how do we become fully human as God means us to be, as Jesus died for us to be? Well, we can start by honoring our vocations as caretakers, as stewards, of the earth. Because the promise is that, as we do that, God will be with us. As we restore nature, we ourselves—our human nature—will be restored by it. And if you ask what this might look like . . . well . . .

Major Hedgehog passed away earlier this month, at the age of 86, having lived, by every account, a good, happy, long, and useful human life. A life, I think, that tells us much about what our relationship with the natural world should be, and what our relationship with God is through Jesus Christ.

All praise be to Him. Amen.