

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, June 20, 1993, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MATTHEW 6:26

“Look at the birds in the sky. They never sow nor reap nor store away in barns, and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Aren’t you much more valuable to Him than they are?”
(Phillips)

BIRD WATCHING

A fascinating hobby that is becoming increasingly popular these days is that of bird watching. The renowned British preacher, Dr. John Stott, who is the same age as I am, and who has never married, has been an avid bird watcher for many years. He has an encyclopedic knowledge of British birds, and even on his preaching and lecturing trips around the world, he finds time to get away with his binoculars to observe the birds of the country he is visiting.

I must confess that although I love birds, I have never found the time to make a hobby of watching them; although I sometimes relax when I have a spare hour by taking down my Encyclopedia of American Birds and memorizing the pictures and names of our flying friends, especially those that frequent our area.

In our text Jesus says, “Look at the birds in the sky...” He was obviously reminding us that by examining the habits of the birds, we can learn valuable lessons about living the life of faith. Our text is set in the context of our Lord’s admonition to us not to worry. He says that if we invest in the things He wants us to invest in, we will have nothing to worry about. The example He uses of creatures that do not worry are the birds. He said, “Watch the birds; they don’t sow or reap or store food away in barns; but God takes care of them.” Then He added, “Don’t you realize that God thinks far more about you than about those birds?”

When I was a schoolboy in Canada, I developed a great interest in the habits of the Canada goose — how God has given them the instinct to fly south at just the right time in the Fall, and then to return north in the Spring. On their journey they do some very interesting things; and I would like to mention four things about these geese as they fly —things that can teach us valuable lessons about Christian living.

1. When those geese start to fly, you will never see them flying solo or in small groups: they are always in a great formation — a formation. Aerodynamically that is the most efficient way for them to fly; and you will always see each bird in its perfect place in the formation. Every single goose has a spot to fill. They say that if one goose drops out and nobody fills his slot, then it creates a problem with the wind draft, and the geese can’t fly as well. It’s a closely-knit formation, and each of them finds his place as they fly along together.

Isn’t that a picture of what the Church is? I think God wants to organize our church into a “V” formation. He wants us to get up and fly! And, every member and friend of the congregation has a place in this formation.

Look at 1 Corinthians 3:5-6. Paul points out how every Christian does something different and has his own slot to fill. Apparently in the Church at Corinth there were varying opinions about who was the better preacher — Paul or Apollos! And Paul says, “Hey, folks, when you make comparisons like this, you’re not being very spiritual.” “...the Lord has assigned to each His task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.”

Or, consider Ephesians 4:11-13. Paul reminds us that God has given each of us different gifts. Some Christians can preach, others can teach, others can evangelize, others can sing, others can visit or engage in hospitality, and so on. But, he says, the purpose of all of it is “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”

The reason God gives you and me a spiritual gift is in order that we may get in formation, and each of us might use his or her gift as He wants us to, so that the Church may continue to move forward. Everybody has something to offer. Some gifts have high visibility; other gifts are exercised in a quiet way behind the scenes.

I remember as a boy worshipping one Sunday in a country church in Northern Ireland. What fascinated me was the pipe organ. It was a big oblong box; and at the close of the service I went up to take a closer look as the organist played the Postlude and discovered that behind the organ was a man pumping a wooden handle up and down! There was no electricity in the church, and the man was pumping so that the bellows might send air into the pipes to create the sound when the organist depressed the keys on the keyboard.

The story goes that one evening in a great church, a renowned organist was giving a recital on just such an organ. At the intermission, people spoke to him, congratulating him on his marvelous talent, and the man who was manning the pump heard the organist say, “I’m probably the finest organist in the country right now. Everywhere I go, people are thrilled by my playing.”

When the second half of the program began, the organist settled down to play, depressed the keys for the first chord, and nothing happened! The man in the back had stopped pumping! The organist leaped from the bench, rushed behind, and began to belabor his assistant — “Why aren’t you operating the pump?” To which the assistant demurely replied, “Sir, I think it would be nice if you had a little more ‘we’ and a little less ‘I’ in what you’re saying!”

Do you know what the Church is? It’s a bunch of “We’s” — a group of folk with gifts — some of them you see; others work faithfully and effectively where they may not even be noticed — but they all come together to form the “V” formation! As a church, I want to see us get into that “V” formation where every person has a place to fill. If God has given you a talent and you don’t use it, there’s going to be a vacancy, and it’s going to hurt everybody else. Here at Faith we expect every member to volunteer to serve in some capacity.

God has given you a gift, and you can do something that nobody else in this church can do. You have a place in the formation, and God expects you to fill it. It’s so important that we do that. Every ministry in this church is carried on because you and fellow members say

— “God has given me a talent to engage in this particular form of service.” Your place in the formation is absolutely vital!

2. If you watch those geese, each wing flap creates a draft. When each bird flaps its wings, it creates a draft for the next one, and he is able to flap his wings more easily! Ornithologists say that because the geese fly in that “V” formation and because the wing flap drafts pull each other along, the geese can fly 71 percent farther than if they try to do it by themselves.

I don’t know if you’re interested in stock car racing or not, but “drafting” is an important element in that sport. What happens is this — one car will drive up close behind one in front and get in its draft. That means that the driver doesn’t need to use as much gas, so he lets his foot off the accelerator slightly. Then, when he sees that he has a chance to pass his opponent, he turns out, puts the accelerator to the floor, and literally catapults past his rival!

Do you know what the Church is? It’s a fellowship where each person “drafts” somebody else! It’s where what we do contributes to the life of somebody else, and it begins to make a difference. As we get into formation, what we do is this — our wing flap helps somebody else, and together we can go 71 percent farther!

Look at the first chapter of John’s Gospel. Jesus was walking along, and Andrew saw Him. Andrew was fascinated by Jesus, and immediately followed Him. What was the first thing Andrew did? He didn’t just say, “I want to share life with the Master all by myself.” No. He went and found his brother, Peter! He said, “Peter, I want you to come and meet Jesus.” And, the draft of Andrew’s flap pulled Peter into the same fellowship with Jesus. Look what Peter became. We aren’t told much more about Andrew, but the New Testament is filled with stories about Peter. Peter became the rock on which Jesus built His Church. Peter was the spokesman on the Day of Pentecost; but Peter would never have been there had it not been for Andrew. It was a case of the “ordinary” bringing the “extraordinary” to Christ.

You can’t even begin to comprehend what one investment of your talent, or time or money might mean in someone else’s life. You could be an Andrew who would bring a Peter to Christ.

Look at Acts 15:36-41. On the second missionary journey, Barnabas saw that because of Paul’s unforgiving spirit, John Mark was going to be left out; so, he said, “I want to give Mark another chance”, and the wing flap of Barnabas brought Mark back into the mission and the ministry, and he became such an asset that Paul later wrote about what a blessing Mark was to him! (2 Timothy 4:11).

You see, each of us is meant by God to take the gifts with which He has endowed us and be faithful stewards of all that He has given us. We attend, we pray, we give, and we serve, and when I do something, my wing flap brings somebody else into what God is accomplishing within the fellowship.

A missionary from Africa came home to America to raise money to construct additional

facilities for his work. He was speaking at a church and hoping for some substantial gifts. During the service a little girl stood up in the front row and said, “I believe in what you’re doing, sir, and I don’t have much money, but I’ve got a dollar, and I want to give it to you.” She went up and handed him her dollar. He said, “Thank you, dear — I’m going to take this dollar and see what I can do with it.” He went down to a Christian book store and bought two tracts that explained the Gospel of Christ. Back in Africa, he met a bright young chieftain and gave him the two tracts. He thought the young man could read English, but he couldn’t. He left the missionary and went back to his tribe. But, he was so fascinated that somebody had given him two tracts that he started to look for somebody to translate them, and he walked for miles to find a translator. When they were translated, it was the Gospel message, and that young chieftain committed his life to Christ. He became so excited about the change that had taken place in his life that he went back to his village and started telling his friends about Jesus, and hundreds of young Africans became Christians. Today, because of that one dollar that little girl gave, you can point to nine churches and maybe as many as 10,000 professing Christians!

Do you realize that your talent, your gift, might do that? Do you hear what I’m saying? I don’t know what your wing flap is going to do, but when those geese flap their wings, it creates a draft, and other birds are helped along.

Never underestimate the effect of your wing flap and the draft it creates to help other lives around you. It might bring someone else into a saving relationship with Christ. Jim Elliot, the missionary who was martyred by the Indians in Ecuador, wrote these words, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, in order to gain what he cannot lose.” Every dollar you invest in God’s work — you don’t know how far it will go. You can’t keep it forever, but if you invest it, you’ll have something that you’ll never, never lose!

3. They say that when one of the geese gets sick, or tired, or gets hurt, and drops out, two geese will always drop out with him, and stay with him on the ground, until he is able to fly again, and then they will escort him back to the flock.

Isn’t that what we’re called upon to do in the Church? Someone has said that Christians are the only ones who shoot their own wounded! When a brother or a sister is tempted and falls into sin, how prone we are to trample them into the dust by our lovelessness and our condemnation.

Listen to what the early Christians did — Acts 4:34, “There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time, those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales, and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.” Isn’t that beautiful?!

In Matthew 25:35-45, Jesus tells us how God will reward us at the last day because today He sees us feeding the hungry, giving clothing to those in need, entertaining the stranger, and visiting the prisoner.

In Galatians 6 there are two seemingly contradictory statements:

Verse 2 says — “Carry each other’s burdens”, whereas
Verse 5 says — “Each one should carry his own load.”

Now, I don’t like to trouble you with the Greek, but these are two different words for “burden” in the original.

“Carry each other’s burdens.” The word is “baros”, and it means a heavy crushing burden that you really can’t carry all by yourself — some sudden tragic bereavement, some excruciating illness, some terrific personal problem you can’t cope with alone — you need encouragement, prayer support, practical assistance, personal counseling.

“Each one should carry his own load.” The word is “phortion”, and it means the pack a soldier carries on his back — a burden, yes, but one that with determination he can carry by himself. For us, this constitutes the daily personal responsibilities we should shoulder ourselves as part of the maturing process.

4. When these geese fly, the same bird doesn’t stay in front all the time. The lead goose, after flying for a while, will drop back to the rear of the formation, and they will all shift up one position. They rotate their leadership. But the ones behind always honk, as if to say, “We’re here, and we’re supporting you!”

Isn’t that a beautiful picture? Here at Faith Church, we rotate the leadership. No one can serve more than three years as an elder or deacon without taking at least one year off. But, let me tell you something — when our leaders drop to the back of the formation, they don’t fold their arms and take a nap. They honk just as loudly as they were honked at when they were up front!

I love Faith Church because it’s a genuinely “honking” Church! A church where everybody loves and encourages everybody else. In one sense I will be moving up to the front of the formation when I become Moderator of the General Assembly next Friday morning in Denver, Colorado. Needless to say, I feel inadequate for the job, and a bit scared. I need you to keep “honking” to encourage me on! Please pray for me every day, especially Friday through Monday, that God will enable me by His Spirit to exercise wisdom and fairness in moderating the Assembly.

Hey, look at the birds! They’re in formation. Their wing flaps are pulling each other along. When one of them goes down, two others go down with him. All of them are honking to let their leader know that they are there and that they are encouraging him in his leadership role.

A lady took her little three-year-old daughter to a friend’s house one day. She thought they were only going for a visit. When she got there, she discovered that her friend had invited a lot of their mutual friends, and they had a surprise birthday party for her; and all of them had brought presents. The little daughter watched all of this and was excited to see her mother so happy, but then she began to feel badly because she didn’t know it was a birthday party, and she hadn’t brought a present for her mother. Running into the kitchen, she returned in a few moments with a huge dishpan. She put it down in the middle of the floor, and got in it, and said, “Mama, my present is me!”

You know what God wants? He wants us in the dishpan! What God wants even more than my money is ME. The greatest thing God could hear from any of us this morning is this —

“Lord, here am I. I give myself to You!”

Look at the birds! They trust their Heavenly Father, and they don't worry!

AMEN!