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The Filbert orchard

1 Nov. 02, Drift Creek
25 Jan. 04, Calvary

SACRIFICE: CHOICE FOR GROWTH

One can't go to a place like Drift Creek and not experience nature. It's so awesome and wild, and yet it has an order so intricate, so symphonic in the way it fits together, and it feels so beautiful.. so right! The more I see of the creation, the more I hear the awe expressed by scientists who probe its secrets or artists who seek to reproduce its splendor, the more I am compelled to ask, "Why do we feel this universal awe? Who told us this is beautiful? Why are we so compelled to find out how it all works? Does this incredible intricacy and beauty mean anything to someone looking for the maker of all this?"

I think it does. When we rejoice in the unspoiled harmony and wholeness of nature, it seems to me we are experiencing part of God's delight in his creation when he said, "it is good." And as man has studied the natural world over the centuries and meditated on his own existence, he has discovered that physical life is full of parallels to spiritual life that give us a glimpse of God's purposes for the world. He's communicating something to us.

The writer of Hebrews, when reviewing the physical details of Abraham's history, concludes, "...**which things are an allegory**". If we begin to see everything around us as media God is using to communicate his purposes for us, all life becomes sacred because it holds a message from God. If we are eager to learn how to work **with** God and not **against** Him in our spiritual lives, nature can teach us many things as allegory. I would like to focus our attention today on two principles of spiritual life which, even though they are well known to the Christian faith, I think can be made clearer by looking to nature as a spiritual illustration. The principles are **growth** and **sacrifice** and I believe

they are related in this way: **Sacrifice is the choice for growth.**

“The canoe in the rapids”

-Life cannot remain static, frozen. It plunges forward. We are sometimes overwhelmed by the movement around us and within us. We seek solid ground for a resting place, a quiet place that doesn't threaten to change. We often seek God for that rock. But when we use God for a rock we sometimes get stuck out on that rock.

When we look at God's universe around us we see things in motion, some fast and some very slow. Things have been moving just like this since God set them in motion, and the **constant in natural life is constant change.**

Life requires growth and growth requires change

1. **Change requires energy or effort :**

any physical or chemical change consumes energy

2.. **Change causes pain and loss**

. There is no growth without energy, change, and loss

3. **Growth requires life: Change in itself will not produce growth**

--Water can thaw and freeze forever and never increase

--Fire changes things and can create the conditions for some things to grow, but does not produce growth.

--Persons may suffer drastic changes without growing significantly from the experience

. **Pain or loss or effort alone will not produce growth**

--Punishment does not always produce learning --resentment

--Loss can produce bitterness or despair rather than growth

. **Only living things can grow:**

-- Living things have the possibility of taking the energy of change and using it to fuel growth.

4. **Sacrifice: All living beings grow using up energy, resources and life itself**

--**life feeds life: biological food chain**, something that was living dies and passes its energy and substance on to another , allowing it to live.

--Simple life feeds only off the bottom of the chain, simple digestion: very efficient. Simple bacteria convert the minerals into organic forms that plants can absorb using the sun's energy to convert them into growing tissue.

--Life forms at the middle of the chain use secondary sources: herbivorous animals eat plants to stay alive. Carnivorous animals eat other animals who have eaten plants who have lived on bacteria: more lives are used up in preparing their sustenance,

..Humans, at the top of the chain, are omnivores: we eat everything! We feed from simple (vegetable) sources, from secondary sources (animals who eat plants before we eat them) and tertiary (food processed from either of these with additional energy and knowledge). The most advanced forms of life require the most concentrated forms of food.

5. There is also a moral and intellectual food chain:

--A wise, well rounded man feeds off all levels of the learning chain: first-hand personal experience, second-hand learning from observing the experiences of others and third-hand knowledge gleaned from persons who have studied and synthesized others learning, chewed the bulk and fiber out of it, and digested the nutrients. . Human civilization can only develop by feeding off the learning and experience of others before us and those around us. This is the wisdom of tradition, organized learning, it is culture and social progress.

--Nutritionists these days advise us to eat low on the food chain. Good teachers have always encouraged us to learn the same way. --The Chinese teacher Confucius said, "What I hear, I forget. What I see, I remember. What I do, I understand. He means that personal experience is the most effective way to learn. Personal observation stay with us but are not always understood and the "processed" 3rd hand information from books, teachers and institutions is so remote we forget most of it. That is not to say it is not important: those who cannot learn from others experience must start on the bottom of the food chain: the school of hard knocks.

6. The additional element of will .

.In the physical realm, living beings do not choose to grow—they must grow or be subsumed to the process of dying. In our Spiritual life also, a person begins dying if he doesn't grow, but additionally he must **WILL** in order to grow.

This truth is familiar to any teacher or parent . Neither punishment nor incentives can cause someone to learn if no will or decision to learn exists in that person. Learning is absolutely voluntary. The **choice to learn** is essential. And it means risk because it is a choice toward change. Change takes effort and it brings loss: energy is spent, time is wasted, routine is upset, sleep is lost, dreams left undone, opportunities not taken.

And because change is not free, it requires a choice to sacrifice something: we give up something in exchange for something better: the chance to grow.

So how can we apply to our spiritual lives the biological and moral principles of growth and change?

1. **First, to stay healthy, Spiritual Life requires growth. It cannot remain fixed and stay healthy.**

. The Medical student on a mission trip: "Doctor, the baby is 4 yrs old".

. It is not enough to maintain the vital functions to be healthy. But unlike physical growth, for spiritual growth to take place we must **choose to grow**. We must **know** that we need to grow and **choose** to accept change. Here is the hitch about spiritual reality that the world cannot accept: not to choose is a choice to die. Remember the canoe? Jehovah urged the people of Israel repeatedly, "Choose life and live!" If you don't choose, you die! Jesus stated the same thing categorically, "He that is not for me is against me". This is a principle we know to be true when accepting the Lord and receiving salvation. But how about growth after birth?

Spiritual growth requires change and change has a cost. The cost is sacrifice. This is not buying growth! This is accepting the nature of reality. To receive His gift of growth, you must drop what you are holding onto. That growth is worth exactly as much to you as has been sacrificed to make it possible. King David, man after Gods own heart said, "Far be it from me to offer unto the Lord that which has cost me nothing!"

So the question is: **What is your spiritual growth worth to you?** What would you give up for it? Your time, your pain, your desires, your preferences, your understanding, your plans, your security, your dreams...all these are yours because they are your own creations. God can take them away but He cannot sacrifice them for you. You alone can choose to do that. Ultimately, our WILL is the only thing we can offer to God that He doesn't already have. We insult him if we think He needs our intelligence, our work, our strength. But our will, yes, and all that goes with it: our desires, our dreams, our love. Jesus promised to

anyone who gave up his security here, a hundred fold return in this life and the coming one!

2. And, second, the food chain gives us a model for keeping our priorities straight in the church if we want to enjoy spiritual growth: **If you want to remain spiritually healthy, eat low on the food chain.** How can we do that?
 - a. First, for spiritual health, there is no substitute for primary personal spiritual experience with God. **Prayer, (communication with Him) and worship (experiencing His presence).** This is eating whole grains for energy and drinking lots of pure water. Mothers, How many times a week should we drink that for good nutrition? Several times a day!! And what happens if we don't? ... we get constipated!
 - b. Next up the food chain, milk and honey are both Biblical expressions for God's nurture to his people. They are both animal products, both products meant by nature for the raising of babies, but sacrificed for human nurture. Milk and honey are for the church **the study of the Word and shared religious experience.** I include the Bible here in the second food group for two reasons-- because **it is the essence of shared religious experience,** the history of salvation, and because I think the **Word is meant by God to be a shared experience, not an individual one.** We study together, suffer together, understand together. This is not so much shared study, this is shared experience. Jesus said, "Where 2 or 3..." Cooks, how many servings should we have of dairy products a week? Are we getting it?
 - c. Lastly, When God called for something to be offered to him for sin, He called for the sacrifice of something representing the highest concentration of energy and nutrition: he called for **meat or oil.** These were not daily offerings for most people but on occasions when people were especially conscious of their need to draw closer to God or to put right something that had gone wrong. This is **theological reflection. It is Bible scholarship. It is sound doctrine. It is institutional church. It is the wisdom of church tradition.** This is the distilling of experience and reflection, the transforming of many sufferings, many other lives into a solid, concentrated substance. In the tabernacle, only the priests

could offer this up for the people and only in the designated times and places. It is because this is concentrated, heavy food, highly processed. **Lots** of cholesterol. It is food for feasting. But if we build our spiritual diet on doctrine, on theological study, on church traditions and the official priests that serve those altars, we will become stodgy and slow as Christians, and probably have a heart attack sooner or later. A steady diet of this meat and oil from the church is like having steak and lobster every day for dinner!

That may sound obvious, but over the centuries it has proven very hard for the Christian church to resist the temptation to overindulge in spiritual cholesterol.

One could say the reformation began with a desperate attempt by Martin Luther to avoid spiritual food poisoning. After 20 yrs eating steak and fries at the church's table, he stood up and said, "I think I'm going to be sick!" And they said, "Not in here, you're not!" and when he went right on ahead, they hauled him out the door to be sick outside! Well, listening to him throw up made a lot of other people start feeling sick too, until the Pope got worried there wasn't going to be anybody left to eat his cake! Martin Luther was trying to get back to a balanced diet for spiritual health, because his soul craved simple, whole foods. And if you think he was extreme, I'd have to say that compared to him, the radical Anabaptists ate like strict vegetarians: they refused to trust any doctrine that wasn't home grown out of New Testament soil, harvested in the believer's personal walk with the Lord and digested in the community of suffering.

Mennonites, I'm not saying we need to become spiritual vegetarians and swear off all the accumulated wisdom of our faith traditions in favor of an "each-to-his-own" spirituality-- No! Besides the inspiring testimonies left to us by our Anabaptist forefathers, we have living, dynamic expressions of faith we need to keep preparing for feasting! The youth conventions are inspiring, our seminaries are Biblical, the historical peace witness is a light to the nations! We should keep reading John Howard Yoder, keep sending

volunteers to MCC and pies to the relief sales, keep sharing potlucks, even keep camping in church camps. But the church cannot depend on those things to give it vital spiritual growth! Our faith, our reflection and our action must spring from LIVING EXPERIENCE WITH GOD! Remember mama's very wise dinner rule for healthy children: "Eat your vegetables first before you get dessert." If the church doesn't teach believers to enjoy the fruits of a personal encounter with God, the veggies of prayer and meditation, the milk and honey of Bible study and fellowship, then the pecan pie of denominational church will make them sick to their stomach. Remember, history is full of sick churches: heart failure, terminal cancer from carcinogenic meat, lactose intolerance to the milk of evangelical preaching, culminating in Revelation's prediction of an anorexic church that can't stomach the truth of the Word!

So, what does our biology class teach us about keeping a healthy spiritual life?

1. Decide to let God keep changing you. Ask Him to show you what you need to sacrifice to do it. Remember, What's it worth to you?
2. Eat your veggies before you get dessert!