

Dear Class Member,

Our lesson this week is about Christian beekeepers who recently described what they are learning from these remarkable insects. We will explore the relationship between humans and the created order, asking what we can learn from observing and interacting with other species.

During the summer, we are not having in-person or virtual Sunday classes. *The Wired Word* continues to be available weekly for use in your homes, with your friends/family/co-workers, or with your fellow Abide Group members. If you would like to subscribe to the free weekly *Wired Word* email, please contact the church office at office@sprucc.org. In-person Sunday classes will resume on Sunday, September 12, 2021.



What Beekeepers Learn From the Humble Honeybee

The Wired Word for the Week of June 13, 2021

In the News

United Methodist beekeepers recently reported that their involvement with the pollinators has increased their sense of wonder and faith.

"I never feel more connected to the earth and to God than when I'm surrounded by a million venomous insects," says Jay Williams, a member of Christ United Methodist Church (UMC) in Franklin, Tennessee. "It's like a tap on the shoulder that says, 'Hey, there's more than you think.'"

Tate Abbott, 18, who is studying wildlife biology in North Carolina, has wanted to be an apiarist since she was 7 years old. Tate is impressed that a honeybee that weighs 0.1 ounce can make such a profound impact on the entire world.

"Even the simplest things, like when bees go out to pollinate flowers ... it's little but that stuff matters," Abbott says. From watching the bees, she concluded that "simple acts of faith" she does for God "may be little but ... can make a huge difference."

When Kristen and Steve Bell retired to Utah, the Beehive State, they decided it made sense to join other beekeepers from Ogden First UMC in the pastime. They maintain a community garden and beehives, mentor local students in beekeeping and market honey to support local and global missions.

It's the bees' commitment to the common good of the hive that stands out to Kristen Bell. "Every creature in the beehive is working for the success of that colony," she said. "I think God is telling us that we are to be doing the same thing."

Ogden First UMC's honey sales help support the work of Mozart Adevu to source and support beekeepers in Accra, Ghana. Developing the industry has significantly boosted income for most farmers involved in the project, according to Adevu.

Mark Price, Christ UMC's pastor of congregational life, emphasized that in addition to providing a way to care for people, beekeeping also helps us care for God's creation. "Beekeeping is a kind of divine stewardship of keeping the earth and God's creatures," Price said.

Relatives of a member of the TWW editorial team, who prefer to remain anonymous, have kept bees and mentored novice apiarists for years. They say bees have strengthened their partnership and taught them:

- How abundant God's gifts to us are.
- Selflessness. Bees would willingly give their lives for the good of the whole colony.

- How amazing their communication skills are.
- How in tune they are with their environmental conditions and stresses (compared to humans).
- Humility. Just when you think you have something figured out, you learn otherwise. Pride easily goes before a fall.
- The importance of having a mentor to observe and learn from throughout life, whether in beekeeping or in one's faith journey. We all need some help along the way. A beekeeping club also helps, providing fellowship, information sharing, encouragement, etc.

Bees are the world's most effective pollinators. By moving pollen from flower to flower, bees help plants to reproduce over long distances, generating fruit and seeds that wildlife rely on for food. According to some estimates, without bees, we could lose one-third of the food we eat.

In 1950, 247 million pounds of honey per year were harvested in the United States alone. As of July 2012, the United States exported only 1.5 million pounds of honey and imported 29 million pounds of honey from around the world.

It takes 12 honeybees their entire lifetime to produce one teaspoon of honey. To produce two pounds of honey, bees fly the equivalent of three times around the world.

There are over 20,000 different species of bees, found on every continent except Antarctica. They come in various sizes and colors. Most live alone; the honeybee is an exception to that rule.

A honeybee colony can contain from 20,000 to 80,000 honeybees and one queen. To keep the colony functioning well requires a high degree of organization, efficiency and coordination.

The queen bee mates with around a dozen male bees (drones), storing up to 6 million sperm in her body. She can produce up to 2,500 eggs a day, more than her body weight. She is the mother of every bee in the hive, and determines the gender of each of her children. The only thing the male honeybees (drones) do is mate, after which they die.

Female worker bees serve the swarm in distinct divisions: Builders construct the honeycomb, guards provide security and protection from intruders, sanitation workers clean the nest to ward off disease, nurses feed the queen bee and larvae, A/C and heating specialists control the temperature so the hive doesn't get too hot in summer or too cold in winter, and gatherers collect nectar and make honey.

Scout bees locate sources of nectar and potential new nesting sites, as needed, and return to the nest to communicate information to the rest of the colony through a waggle dance. Scouts vary the dance to indicate the direction, distance and quality of the food source or nesting site.

Researchers have discovered that bees can use tools: They are able to learn to pull a string or move a ball across a goal line in "bee football" to get a food reward. But while honeybees are disciplined and dedicated workers, they spend two-thirds of their time doing nothing, resting to recharge their energy. Humans can learn a lot about work and play from the tiny honeybee!

More on this story can be found at these links:

[How Sweet It Is: United Methodists and Bees. *umc.org*](#)

[The Spiritual Importance of Honeybees. *Guideposts*](#)

[Lessons from the Honeybee. *tcog.ca*](#)

[10 Life Lessons From a Honeybee. *The Logical Optimist*](#)

[Bees. *NewScientist*](#)

Applying the News Story

Beekeeping in the Middle East dates back at least 3,000 years, according to archaeologists. Honeybees pollinate the majority of our crops and trees, giving us the food we eat and the air we breathe. The work of pollination that bees do has been called holy; they are considered by some to be sacred animals because of their self-sacrificial pattern of living

for others that supports the ecosystem of the entire earth. Bees help create habitats for birds, insects and mammals, fertilizing plants upon which animals and people rely for oxygen, food and other resources necessary for survival.

Honey is referenced in the Bible over 60 times. God described the promised land as "a land flowing with milk and honey" (e.g., Exodus 3:8, 17).

God provided the Israelites manna in the wilderness, which tasted "like wafers made with honey" (Exodus 16:31), "nursed" his people "with honey from the crags" (Deuteronomy 32:13) and satisfied them "with honey from the rock" (Psalm 81:16).

Honey was given as gifts (Genesis 43:11; 1 Kings 14:1-3), used to support the priests and the Levites (2 Chronicles 31:4-5), traded as a commodity (Ezekiel 27:17), included in provisions for troops (2 Samuel 17:27-29) and used as part of a ransom (Jeremiah 41:8). Jonathan tasted a bit of honey from a honeycomb he found during a battle, and "his eyes brightened." The honey strengthened him for the task at hand (1 Samuel 14:24-30). John the Baptist subsisted on locusts and wild honey (Matthew 3:4; Mark 1:6).

The Big Questions

1. What can we learn from observing bees or other creatures in the natural order? What might we miss when we fail to pay attention to the created world?
2. The psalmist says, "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!" (Psalm 119:103) Which of God's words is sweetest to you? How do you taste God's words?
3. Jay Williams said beekeeping has helped him connect with the earth and with God: "It's like a tap on the shoulder that says, 'Hey, there's more than you think.'" When, if ever, have you felt that kind of "tap on the shoulder" that intrigued you and made you want to know more?
4. When, if ever, have you felt that your skills, gifts and efforts are too small to make much of a difference in the world? How might lessons learned from honeybees change your perspective?
5. Compare and contrast the way a healthy hive functions with how your church functions. What practices that honeybees use to organize and coordinate their effort do you use in your church? Which practices can you adopt or strengthen?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Job 12:7-10

[Job said,] "But ask the animals, and they will teach you;

the birds of the air, and they will tell you;

ask the plants of the earth, and they will teach you;

and the fish of the sea will declare to you.

Who among all these does not know

that the hand of the LORD has done this?

In his hand is the life of every living thing

and the breath of every human being." (For context, read 12:7-13.)

Many people believe that humans are the most intelligent beings on earth. But in this passage Job indicates that humans could learn a thing or two from plants and animals.

Is it really possible to become like Dr. Doolittle and "talk to the animals"? According to legend, the wizard Merlin prepared the boy Arthur to be a good king by turning him into animals such as a fish, hawk, ant, goose and badger. Native American Indians and animists around the world believe all living natural objects have souls or spirits.

In Numbers 22:22-35, we have an example of how one animal understood more than God's prophet Balaam did. Balaam's donkey saw the angel of the Lord blocking the road and turned off into a field, but Balaam failed to see what his animal saw plainly. Three times the prophet struck the beast for refusing to go forward.

Finally, "the LORD opened the mouth of the donkey," who asked why Balaam was abusing her so (v. 28). Most people, if they heard their animal speak their language, would pause to ask why. But not Balaam. Not exactly the sharpest tack. It wasn't enough that God opened the donkey's mouth; God also had to open Balaam's eyes (v. 31) before the prophet could see what the donkey saw.

Author Benjamin Hoff wrote: "Lots of people talk to animals. Not very many listen, though. That's the problem."

Questions: How should we view bees, animals and other living organisms? What biblical texts support your theology of animals?

If you could talk to one animal, which would you choose, and what one question would you like to ask? What do you think animals "know" that humans may not see or may have forgotten?

Matthew 6:26, 28-30

[Jesus said,] "Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ... And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you -- you of little faith?" (For context, read 6:25-34.)

Jesus frequently taught people in the open air, where the natural environment provided ample object lessons upon which he drew to illustrate a point. So he could use a camel and a gnat to talk about hypocrisy and the danger of over-reliance upon riches (Matthew 19:24; 23:24), seeds to describe the need for faith and openness to God's word (Matthew 13) and sparrows to remind his listeners that every person has worth in the eyes of God (Matthew 10:29).

In this passage, Jesus uses birds of the air and lilies of the field to depict God's loving care and provision for all creation, and to advise his disciples not to worry, but to trust God.

Questions: Read Ecclesiastes 9:12. In addition to the point Jesus made in the Matthew text above, what else can we learn from watching the birds of the air? Read 1 Peter 1:24-25. What else can we learn from observing the flowers of the field?

Proverbs 30:24-28

*Four things on earth are small,
yet they are exceedingly wise:
the ants are a people without strength,
yet they provide their food in the summer;
the badgers are a people without power,
yet they make their homes in the rocks;
the locusts have no king,
yet all of them march in rank;
the lizard can be grasped in the hand,
yet it is found in kings' palaces. (For context, read 30:15-19, 24-31.)*

Many proverbs, adages and fables feature animal characters to embody virtues and vices. See if you can fill in the blanks with the names of the animals usually associated with these phrases:

- Quiet as a ____
- Sly as a ____
- Curiosity killed the ____
- If you think you're too small to make a difference, you haven't spent the night with a ____
- Silly as a ____
- Proud as a ____
- A busy ____
- A greedy ____
- Stubborn as a ____

Such sayings teach us something about animals, but they are also meant to be used as mirrors that can help us understand human behavior.

Analyze each couplet in the Proverbs text individually. Then consider the import of the couplets taken together.

Questions: According to the text, what specific wisdom do ants possess? Badgers? Locusts? A lizard?

Consider how much bees accomplish, with brains the size of poppy seeds or sesame seeds. Taken together, what overall lesson can we learn from the weak, powerless, leaderless and small creatures in the text? How can people who feel weak, powerless, leaderless and small gain hope and courage by observing creatures like these?

1 Corinthians 12:4-7, 11-12

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. ... All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. (For context, read 12:4-20.)

Biologists call the cooperative way bees live "eusociality," meaning "good social relations."

The passage above could have been written about a beehive. While honeybees lack the ability to speak, read or write, they can teach humans much about cooperation and teamwork. Each bee contributes a specific skill to the colony, synchronizing their efforts for the benefit of all. Worker bees, who only live about 30 days, collect nectar for the sake of the colony, not for themselves. It takes two months to produce honey out of the nectar, so the workers eat honey provided by other bees that have preceded them, and they never get to consume the fruit of their own labor, which they leave for others to eat.

In his article, "[The Voice of God in the Voice of the Bees](#)," R. S. Beal Jr., Associate Professor of Zoology at Arizona State University, observes that honeybees take on different roles to maintain the health of the colony. Every bee is important. As each bee fulfills the task he or she has been assigned, the colony thrives.

Even so, the health and well-being of the body of Christ depend on each organ or limb in the body fulfilling its responsibility to the organism as a whole. When we all exercise our individual gifts, serving in various ways through different activities for the common good, the entire body of Christ thrives. There are no lone-ranger Christians. Humans

are interdependent, but sometimes we like to imagine that we can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. The truth is, we all need each other to survive and thrive.

"Those of us who have believed in Jesus belong to one another just as much as we belong to Christ," Beal writes. "We cannot live independently of one another any more than we can live independently of Christ. Like the bees, we must learn to practice the sacrifice, labor, sharing, and submission of love that together we 'may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ.'"

Colonies of honeybees thrive because each bee is willing to sacrifice for the good of the group: All for one, and one for all! A guard who stings an intruder to protect the colony dies in the fight. If food becomes scarce in winter, drones leave the hive, sacrificing their lives for the sake of the rest of the colony. Beal refers to 1 John 3:16 to support his point that Christians should be just as willing to sacrifice for the sake of brothers and sisters in Christ.

Beal points to Ephesians 5:21 and 1 Peter 5:5 as evidence that we are called to submit our personal preferences to one another when the good of the body of Christ is at stake. "The need for love and unity is infinitely greater than any need for personal elevation," he states.

One example of this kind of submission, seen in bee colonies, happens when a hive becomes overcrowded and a new queen is produced to continue the work of the original hive. Then the old queen takes half the workers off to establish another homesite. Scouts fly off to identify potential locations.

Upon their return, each one performs a dance to describe the advantages of the site she found. Because the swarm can only choose one new home, some of the bees must "change their minds." Eventually, the scouts will change their behavior until all are dancing in favor of one homesite, whether or not they had originally lobbied for that location. Once they all agree, the swarm moves to the new location together. They maintain their unity and survive because each bee willingly submits personal preferences to the welfare of the community.

Questions: Where do you see diversity of gifts and ministries in your local church? How do you see unity in the Spirit expressed? How are you using your own spiritual gifts to build up the body of Christ?

Discuss how each Christian is at the same time (1) an individual in the image of God, and (2) a member of a larger "body of Christ" with his or her own functions and needs.

For Further Discussion

1. St. Francis de Sales wrote that "the bee collects honey from flowers in such a way as to do the least damage or destruction to them, and he leaves them whole, undamaged and fresh, just as he found them." What lesson can humans take away from the way bees relate to their environment in this example?
2. Check out and respond to this pair of inspiring journal entries from a mother and daughter who have been involved in beekeeping as a team for the past four years: "[Blessings of Beekeeping](#)," by Stacey Owen, and "[Bees Bringing People Together](#)," by 13-year-old Peyton Owen.
3. During the past four years, [Magawa](#), an African giant pouched rat, helped clear more than 2.4 million square feet of land by detecting 71 land mines and 38 undetonated live explosives in Cambodia so that they could be safely removed. Christophe Cox, CEO of the nonprofit [APOPO](#) (an acronym from Dutch which stands for "Anti-Persoonsmijnen Ontmijnende Product Ontwikkeling" or, in English, "Anti-Personnel Landmines Detection Product Development"), said rats are uniquely qualified for this work because of their powerful sense of smell. They are too light to trigger the mines and "can screen an area of 200 square meters in half an hour -- something which would take a manual de-miner four days," Cox said. The humans who defuse the mines are so confident in the rats' ability, Cox said, that they play soccer on the fields the rodents have cleared.
Trained in scent discrimination by his handler, Malen, Magawa was given bananas as his reward for learning tasks

such as walking across a surface or finding a target. After receiving a gold medal from the UK vet charity PDSA for gallantry in the face of danger, the Tanzanian bomb-sniffer is now retiring to live out the rest of his days playing and eating to his heart's content.

Given that rats are often feared and maligned because throughout history, they have been carriers and spreaders of deadly diseases, how might attitudes toward rats change because of stories like this one? Why do you think the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) came to our minds when we heard about Magawa? What can we learn from this African hero?

4. Consider this, from TWW "beekeeper, more or less," Frank Ramirez: "I don't know how 'woke' this comment might be, but I always hear folks refer to a bee as 'he' even though the workers are all female. People kind of know this because they've all heard of drones, who literally do no work, eat honey all day, hang out together at a tree bragging to each other until a queen flies by, in which case they all rush after her to mate. The successful ones die in the process. A fellow beekeeper refers to her bees as 'the girls.' The drones get kicked out of the hive in October. No more free ride. The workers push the drones out and refuse to let them return, for all their buzzing. It's like watching the Aesop fable 'The Ants and the Grasshopper' on steroids."

5. Reflect on this, from United Methodist Kristen Bell, who commented on Proverbs 16:24 ("Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body"): "I love how this is reflexive. My kind words can build others up and, at the same time, keep me in a positive mental state, which is so healthy for my body."

6. Though a bit dated, this video may interest you: [City of Bees \(Video 27:35\)](#). [Moody Institute of Science](#).

7. Discuss these lessons that [writer Aminata Coote](#) took away from observing a beekeeper at work over a period of several months:

- Just as scout bees are always on the lookout for predators and food, Christians need to be alert and aware of things that might endanger us spiritually as well as places we can find healthy nourishment for our souls.
- Just as bees keep a clean hive and discard anything that might decrease productivity, Christians should also remove "clutter ... [and] distractions" that might limit their effectiveness in their service to God.
- Bees even cut ties with members of their hive, when they become a danger to or drain on the community. In winter, if food becomes scarce, worker bees drive the drones out of the hive to keep the rest of the swarm from starving. If the hive becomes overcrowded, the old queen leads half the swarm out to establish a new swarm elsewhere, so that both communities have the best chance of survival. Coote suggests there are times when we need to cut ties with people who may have a negative influence on us.
- Each bee has a specific role to play for the health of the community. Christians need to discover what their role in God's kingdom is.
- Just as there can only be one queen in a hive, Coote says we need to establish that God reigns supreme in our lives, without any rivals for our loyalty.
- Just as the queen bee gets only the best (the royal jelly), while the other bees in the hive eat pollen and honey, God deserves the best we have to offer.
- Just as bees live to serve the queen and the community, we should be motivated to serve God and God's community.
- Just as bees live sacrificially and generously, willingly giving their lives for the sake of the hive, we should live the same way, willingly giving our lives for the sake of others.
- Just as bees work together for the common good, so we should pull together for the good of all.

Responding to the News

Consider planting a bee-friendly garden around your own home and local church. This may be a good time to research other ways to render aid to honeybees, who are in decline around the world. Since the health of bees is crucial to the survival of other species, including human life itself, think about how you can reduce pesticide use and encourage the adoption of bee-friendly agricultural and land-use policies.

Prayer

Holy Spirit, help us to use our individual gifts for the benefit of the entire body of Christ, willingly learning from one another, affirming each other, and serving others in the grace and strength you provide, for the glory of God. Amen.

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