Here's another story from the back deck of my house.

One morning last week I was watching the trees in my back yard,
and my eye kept being drawn to the birds.

There were at least a dozen of them flitting from tree to tree,
and watching them in the morning light I had that familiar thought -
wouldn't it be nice to be a bird?
To float on the wind, to fly over it all?

Then something else caught my eye -
a shiny, white jet climbing away from earth -
not floating on the wind but powering through the sky
in a perfect straight line,
the bright sun lighting up the familiar colors
of a hometown Delta jet.

And wouldn't it be nice to be on that plane, I thought,
headed to some place I've never seen before,
halfway round the world?

But then, as it flew out of sight I heard something else - a scratching sound.
My eye followed my ear to the tallest pine trees in my yard,
both at least 100 feet tall, maybe 150.

And on the highest branch I saw them, 2 squirrels,
surely playing as much as anything else, darting from place to place,
twirling around a branch instead of going in a straight line.

They went round and round to the tip
of the highest branch of the tree on the left, and then - they leapt!

150 feet off the ground those 2 squirrels leapt
from the top of one tree to the next and then raced down it
in a spiral all the way to the ground.

Surely we've all dreamed of flying like a bird,
all dreamed of hopping a jet to fly to some new place.

But as I sat in my chair with my achy morning knees and hips
and watched these fearless acrobats, I wondered,
"Who has God really blessed the most?"
The birds soaring through the sky,
the people jetting across the world,
or maybe, maybe the lowly, dreaded squirrels?

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The theme for this year's pledge campaign is Plenty Good Room.

Plenty good room, plenty good room,
Plenty good in my Father's Kingdom.

I want to tell you about 3 people,
3 very different people who each found their way
to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, mind & strength,
and to love their neighbor as themselves.
The playful among you might listen to their stories
and decide which one is a bird, which a jet,
and which, alas, is the lowly squirrel.

Each one's gifts have been celebrated in some part of the church,
but would likely be looked at with suspicion in another.

I suppose that's just the way of things,
but in the fullness of the Body of Christ
the truth is we desperately need all 3 of their gifts.

Plenty good room. Plenty good room.

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The first, Sarah Coakley, is a systematic theologian,
the fanciest of all the theologians.
One of the most respected living today.

She's taught at Cambridge and Harvard, and I have been fortunate
to hear her lecture at both Sewanee and Emory.

She recently told an interviewer she wanted to become a theologian
when she was only 12 years old because of
"the rather bad preparation for confirmation
I received from my priest."

"Questions came up," she said of that confirmation class,
"questions that seemed to me to be life-changing,
questions that anyone of any substance or moral tenacity
would want to have answered."

And, since the priest didn't seem able to answer them,
she has spent her life trying to do it herself,
spent her life in a deep, faithful,
intellectual pursuit of God's mysteries.

She writes books with titles like "God, Sexuality and the Self."
She talks about contemplative prayer as "the crucible of purification,"
and she gets invited to speak all over the world.

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Last weekend, a woman named Kate Kilcup was invited to speak,
right here at Holy Trinity.
But Kate came to us not as an academic, but as a poet.

Kate wrote a book called "Between the Light and Me."
It's a memoir of her journey through trauma and addiction
into a kind of hard-won peace that she mostly sees
not as her own victory, but as God's.

Like Sarah Coakley, Kate had trouble with the church in her teens.
"The problem," she said, "was that the church we attended
was not in any way prepared…to address anything like
the deep and socially unacceptable hungers I felt."
"It seemed like a place for nice people….I wanted the truth."

Kate doesn't write systematic theology like Sarah Coakley does.
Instead, Kate soars over the story of her own life.
She tries in her book to see the truth of her life,
tries to comprehend the moments when the Holy Spirit
was moving through her, especially when all seemed lost.

Kate's story is the kind of story we celebrate here.
It's a kind of Prodigal Son story,
the story of an artist searching for and finding healing
in God's merciful hand.

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The last story is about a man named Lee Ayers.

Now, back before he died,
Lee probably wouldn't have been invited to speak at Holy Trinity,
and definitely not at Harvard or Cambridge,
which is a shame for all of us.

People who are preachers at churches with names like
Crystal Springs Church of God of Prophecy don't get invited to speak
at the same places as Sarah Coakley or Kate Kilcup.

My daddy's been writing down some of his memories
and he wrote one about his friend Lee Ayers.

Lee was born in 1950,
and except for his years in the army as a Green Beret.
Lee was a lifelong resident of Dawson County.

Daddy called Lee a "raw-bone country boy."

When Lee got out of the army he had a job lined up,
but he said the Lord told him to leave that job and go work at home,
and that He would provide.

So Lee followed the Lord's command.
He built a single stall shop behind his house
and called it Amen Automotive.

Lee's special calling turned out to be helping
the poorer of his neighbors in Dawson County
keep their cars on the road.

Dad said Lee would sometimes come to the junkyard
and spend half a day looking for cheap parts
to patch up somebody's worn out car.
Something that could keep it on the road just a little bit longer
for not a lot of money.

Lee fixed the cars of people who really couldn't afford to fix their cars,
and Dad said sometimes he would give Lee parts for free
that weren't worth much to anybody else.

Dad said while Lee wandered the yard,
the two of them would talk about life,
and that the conversation would make Dad's burdens
feel a little bit lighter.

Dad called Lee a man of God. I'd say it takes one to know one.

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It's easy for me to idealize somebody like Lee,
somebody who comes from where I come from,
somebody who represents some part of my past.

Just like it's easy for others of us to idealize intellectuals,
or women theologians like Sarah Coakley
or the hard-won sobriety and peace of Kate Kilcup.

We all need exemplars of the faith.
We all need people who show us how to take
our particular gifts and stories - and brokenness -
and use them to love the Lord our God,
use them to love our neighbor.

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Last week, I asked Will if he could learn a song written by Caroline Herring,
one of our former members.

It's based on Psalm 131 and earlier in the week when I had the idea
it was because I wanted to celebrate the simple, humble faith
of a raw-bone country boy named Lee Ayers,
in a kind of opposition to the other people's faith.

Thankfully, the Holy Spirit worked that out for me
over the course of the week,
because the song is not just for raw-bone country boys, or girls.

Really, the song is for all of us.

It's for famous theologians who know they also need contemplative prayer
to draw close to God.

It's for the poets and the wounded who look back on their lives
to see the gentle and sometimes not-so-gentle hand of God.

It's for backyard mechanics who come home from war
and spend the rest of their lives
helping neighbors keep their cars on the road
so they can keep their jobs and buy groceries.

It's a song for all of us, for you and for me,
for the birds, the jets, and the squirrels, all of us.

Because in our Father's mansion
there really is plenty good room for everybody.

Amen.