

“Callings, Camps, and Christian Motorcycles”
A Sermon Preached by Rev. Dr. Jake Hofmeister
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Camp Sunday – February 28, 2016

Jeremiah 1: 4-8
Ephesians 4: 7, 11-13

I'm Rev. Jake Hofmeister, and I've been Executive Director of Pyoca Camp, Conference, and Retreat Center since December of 2014. It's been a very rewarding experience serving at Pyoca and sharing in this amazing outdoor ministry with you and the broader community. Thank you for your support and this opportunity to be here today, and I look forward to working more with you in the future.

Today, I'd like to talk about three things: Callings. Camps. And Christian Motorcyclists. First, I'll tell you a little bit about myself, my story, and my call to ministry. Then we'll talk our two scripture passages: Jeremiah's calling from God and the verse from Ephesians that highlights each of us receiving our own unique gifts from Christ. And I'll end with a few stories from Pyoca that illustrate the wonderful gifts camps give to our church in the areas of faith creation and vocational discernment.

So now a little about me...

Twenty-six years ago, in 1990, Geneva Hills Presbyterian Church Camp in Ohio, created a weeklong motorcycle trip as the final program of the camp season. Both my parents being avid motorcyclists, they signed up the whole family. My parents probably thought, “The fun and adventure of motorcycle riding combined with instilling good religious values for my children? We are there! Who wouldn't love that?”

I was eight and my brother, Kyle, was almost 5 years old the first year of the motorcycle trips. Mom threw me on the back of her Low Rider Harley, with a 21 inch, spoked front wheel and Dad threw my brother in the side car of his 1965 BMW boxer. My brother hesitated initially, but when my father lured him into the seat with a half dozen Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle figurines, he turned into a most laidback motorcycle passenger, often falling asleep in the bottom of the side car.

We made the 30 minute ride to Geneva Hills. As we turned into the gravel drive that began winding back into the wooded hills of central Ohio, we noticed several other bikes behind us. We pulled up to the lodge and saw about 12 bikes total, all of them different makes. Some of the riders were pastors, some were lay people, some were beginners, some were experts, some were retired.

Later on, during the trip, as we all stopped at a scenic view pull-off, a passerby came up to talk to us. As he approached us, he saw that we were all together, but

all riding different brands of motorcycles. He said, "You guys must be Christian." The leader of our group, John, responded. "Why yes, we are. How'd you know?" The man answered "Because that's the only way that a Harley rider would ever be caught dead riding with BMW, Suzuki, and a Honda!" We all laughed. And he was right. Harley riders ride together. BMW riders ride together. Honda riders ride together.

And that's the first time I realized, something deeper than brand loyalty brought us together. We were Christian. We cared about religion. Sure, we rode for the fun, the camaraderie, and the adventure. But, there was an even deeper reason. We were on a religious pilgrimage.

I remember vividly that first night around a big table in the lodge at Geneva Hills. The directors, John and Fay, got us ready for the week ahead: we planned to ride from Ohio down through the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, out to the beaches of the Outer Banks, and then back through Virginia. And along the way we were going to stop at a different church camp at night where we would worship, sing, and lead devotions. And that the point of the trip was to deepen our relationship with God, with each other, with the communities we visit, and with nature. The motorcycle was just the vehicle to achieve this more important end.

Our misfit motorcycle gang dubbed ourselves 'Hill's Angels,' a combination of Geneva Hills Presbyterian Camp and the legendary Hell's Angels motorcycle gang. So that began 6 years of motorcycle trips that planted the seed for my call to ministry.

We rode from church camp to church camp, to religious community to retreat center. We stopped, visited, and shared meals with Mormons in Ohio, Mennonites in Kentucky, and Methodists in North Carolina. We stayed at camps run by Nazarenes in Illinois, Presbyterians in Michigan, and non-denominational Christians in Iowa. We even visited a Jewish camp in Pennsylvania and a secular community in Virginia. We saw the peaks of the Appalachian Mountains, the beaches of the Atlantic, the fury of Niagara Falls, and the towering dunes of Lake Michigan. We met many fascinating and faithful people, listened to inspiring faith stories, and immersed ourselves in God's beautiful creation. The Hill's Angels Christian Biker Gang became a new faith family for me, and my faith community grew from my local Presbyterian congregation to all the people we met along the road.

In addition to the life-changing motorcycle trips, I went to many years of summer camp at Geneva Hills, too. I love to reminisce about singing "Light the Fire" or "Awesome God" around the campfire for vespers. I still remember every word of those camp songs.

I can still remember the anxious feeling as I climbed up to the high ropes course for the first time. After making it across all the obstacles, I can remember the

feeling of triumph and joy as I ziplined across the lake. I remember feeling surprised how I could overcome my fears and meet the tough challenge of the ropes course. I learned how important it is to help each other, trust in each other, and build a community. I couldn't have made it across that ropes course without the help of the staff and my fellow campers

In the midst of these amazing experiences on the ropes course and at the campfire, and on those motorcycle trips, God was speaking to me. It may not have been as loudly and clearly as the prophet Jeremiah experienced, but God's voice was there.

Jeremiah's call story, from our first scripture reading, is a powerful testament to listening to God's call and guidance for our lives. Jeremiah, even before he was born, was predestined to be a prophet of God. He heard God's voice at such a young age. And Jeremiah had his doubts about himself. He thought he was too young. He was nervous and scared about the road ahead. But God responded, "Do not be afraid, I am with you."

This past summer, at Pyoca, one of our counselors answered the call from God. She came to Pyoca as a camper for many years and then as she made the transition to college became one of our best summer staff members. Attending a state university in Indiana, she had always wanted to be a doctor and was studying pre-med, which is definitely an impressive and much needed calling in our communities. But throughout her time as a staff member, she began to hear God's voice telling her to go into the ministry. But not only did she hear the call from God herself, but the Pyoca community affirmed it for her, which is an important part of our Reformed theology. It was affirmed by myself and others in seeing her passion and energy for the ministry. It was affirmed by the campers she kept safe on high ropes and at the waterfront. It was affirmed by that scared and struggling camper who did not fit in as she helped him feel more like he belonged throughout the week. And let's be honest, anyone willing to take the future paycut from a doctor's salary to the modest earnings of a minister must truly have a calling.

She is now finishing out her senior year and will serve as a Young Adult Volunteer next year in North Carolina. She is discerning which seminary to attend to pursue her M.Div.

And this example isn't an isolated incident. A 2012 Presbyterian Study polled a group of pastors, asking them to name the setting where they had a significant spiritual growth experience that impacted their Christian life. Pastors listed camps as number one, retreats as number two, and conferences as number three. Pastors receive their call and form their faith at camp. But it's not just about preparing future pastors, but our entire future generations to discern their gifts from God.

Our second scripture reading from Ephesians, highlights the reality that we all have our own unique gifts and our own unique calling from God. "that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers." I would

go on to add that some some would be lawyers, speech pathologists, some doctors and nurses and social workers, public servants and accountants. We are all called to something. And even if we may not feel totally called to our jobs or occupations, we can fulfill God's call to build up the body of Christ no matter what we are doing.

I had a conversation with a Pyoca board member a few months back. She told me that as a kid she lacked self-esteem and was awkward. She felt like an outsider and that she didn't belong. But one summer at Pyoca, she attended a week of camp that was hosted by Westminster Neighborhood Ministries out of Indianapolis. Westminster serves at-risk youth in the poverty stricken near east side of the city. Westminster would bring campers down, many of whom had never hiked in the woods or had never swum in a lake.

Our board member, not connected to Westminster, normally attended a different week of camp, but for some reason this year was different. One night, in the chapel that week with the Westminster kids, she experienced an overwhelming feeling of belonging to community and being a part of something. A feeling of welcome. She remembers the exact moment and place she was sitting when she prayed to Jesus and proclaimed her faith. There is such power to her story, especially as she tells it with tears in her eyes. A child who feels like an outsider, comes to camp with new people who have a much different life, but then has a profound experience of belonging, of family, of faith. Ever since then she has been energetically engaged in Pyoca's ministry. She even created an internship for herself at Pyoca on her way to answering her call from God to become a nurse.

The foundation of the church is and always will be the local congregation, although we are seeing it undergo some changes right now and may look different in the future. But camp and conference centers complement churches nicely by offering a space to facilitate callings and faith formation. I'm very excited to be part of this ministry partnership and invite you to join me in its very bright future.

So there you have it. Call stories. Camp Stories. And Christian Motorcycle stories. God is doing some amazing things in our midst. My hope for us in this moment is that when we go out from this morning's worship, we will be intent to listen for God's guidance and join in the work of equipping the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ. Let us all be like Jeremiah, Let's all be like the church that the Ephesians passage describes, let's all be like Pyoca's summer staff member who is going into the ministry, like Pyoca's board member who serves God through nursing, and if your weird enough, like me, let us all ride motorcycles in a Christian motorcycle gang, called the "Hill's Angels." Amen.