

The Third Sunday of Easter

May 5, 2019

Preached by Sophia Younger

St Michael's Episcopal Church, Barrington, IL

Acts 9:1-20; Psalm 30; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

Over the 18 years that I have been a member of this congregation, I would like to be honest and say that I have personally struggled many times with my faith. And I know that sounds odd, but I was surprised to hear that I was not alone while listening to Mother Lisa preach last week about the spiritual curiosity of the new confirmands this year.

This Gospel reading I felt spoke to me because of the imagery and the underlying message that I and other graduating high school seniors struggle to understand: The what happens next and where will I end up and does any of what I'm doing right now really matter?

In this Gospel reading Jesus said to Simon, "When you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go."

This quote immediately made think of my own life experiences, especially my camping experiences at the Camp Manitowish in the Northern-most part of Wisconsin.

For the past five years, I've spent July at this YMCA camp. The summer I spent on a 14-day outpost trip in the Georgian Bay on Lake Huron changed my life. I participated in a sea kayaking expedition, not just as a participant but as a leader. I had looked forward to this opportunity to experience both the beauty and the challenges of nature; nevertheless, I battled feelings of trepidation. The surrounding landscape was extraordinary—like being on another planet. A trek to the Porcupine Mountains of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, left me with tortured knees when carrying a 70-pound backpack over seven miles a day proved too much for my freshman frame, and I'd spent my first canoe adventure sick with fever. The water was crystal clear, a view to the bottom in some places. On our first day on Lake Huron we paddled 13 miles for around 12 hours. Day 2, the temperature dropped 20 degrees. It was what we campers call a "duff day": wind too strong and waves too high— 10 foot peaks!—for us to paddle. I was struck by nature around me: tree frogs and snakes; flocks of seagulls and cormorants; plants growing on flat rocks, their roots creeping into cracks; and blueberry bushes as far as the eye could see. In those two weeks, we encountered several challenges. We paddled days through pouring rain. During that same time, I navigated us expertly through waterways, vast and narrow. Working as the primary leader of a small group opened my eyes to understanding others on a deeper level, as well as to understanding myself.

I remember my lovely and kind youth group leader, Kay Lewis, always asks us about our little "God moments" throughout the day while we were on our mission trip last summer. If there was one major "God moment" in my life, it would be my experiences at camp. Although my trip focused and altered the course of my life, the first few days were extremely tough, emotional, and raw. There was this feeling that I had that even though that me and my campmates were entirely isolated in the middle of the Canadian wilderness, there was this overwhelming sense of being safe and protected. We were entirely at peace.

These trips focused my seemingly hectic and confusing life and drove me to be the person I am today because it brought out the passion in me that I have had ever since I was a little girl: my love for exploration of the natural world. After visiting Lake Huron, I was convinced that it was the most beautiful place on Earth. Yet, I am conflicted with a harsh and upsetting question: will this gorgeous place look the same and will its unique ecosystem continue to thrive in ten or twenty years time? What I ultimately learned from this trip is that I am obligated to protect the place that I love so that others may enjoy and gain awareness like I did. This trip has pushed me towards my goals of majoring in environmental science and to my dream to become part of the elusive and overdue solution to climate change.

There was a time where knowledge was power, and it was assumed that if humanity had the right understanding or information about a topic, we would be able to make the world a better place as knowledge was limitless. The modern age and sad reality that we live in today has evolved to be quite different: knowledge does not have the same power that it once had, in fact, I believe that it is almost powerless. Humanity today is short-sighted by the overabundance and mind-numbing array of information that is available literally at our fingertips.

So, how do humans react to this ironic situation? When faced with all of this knowledge, it is easy to become paralyzed instead of empowered. It is frightening to me that today, media and influencers go as far to question the reliability of scientific data collected and analyzed by the top professionals in their fields. Knowledge does not empower humanity as it once did, it is now almost a form of entertainment.

The Gospel of John preaches about power in the form of knowledge, and it is about truth. This truth is knowledge that refuses to be objectified and controlled. This knowledge is different as it is expressly relational and deeply passionate. Today, this type of knowledge that is in the Gospel of John is hard to come by because not all knowledge is statistics, random facts, or memorized series of events. This Gospel reading addresses the natural human temptation to turn a blind eye to enormous problems with even larger solutions. The reality is this: there is an overwhelming need for change and little resources.

I have seen what this congregation is capable of, and we have grown accustomed to facing overwhelming need around the world. It seems common today that people are quick to judge and are taken aback by the sheer magnitude of issues such as climate change. People react by asking, "Who am I and how do my living habits affect the environment around me?" People easily underestimate how much of a difference can actually be made by one person. I recently watched an interview featuring a young woman and over the past four years, she has only made a mason-jar size amount of garbage. In just one year, the average American makes about 2,000 pounds of trash each year, and a lot of that trash does not end up in landfills. It ends up in our oceans where it will break apart into small pieces. Since plastic never decomposes, it remains in the oceans until it is eaten by sea life or it falls to the bottom of the ocean. There have been plastic water bottles that have been found at the deepest parts of the sea and in depths that were once unexplored by humans. Plastic is found regularly in the stomachs of the fish and shellfish that about 2/3 of humans rely on for their diets, and the chemicals from that plastic seep into their bodies which end up in our stomachs. The fish that Simon once ate in this Gospel are now riddled with chemicals and are overfished. Is this what God would have wanted?

I cannot imagine that Jesus standing on the beach could think 2000 years in advance and know the consequences of humanity on God's creation. I have realized that the doubt that I've had about my faith is not about God, it is the doubt that I have in other people who hurt God's creation. This congregation has made me believe that together we have strength, even if it is taking the few seconds out of your day to check out your neighborhood recycling programs if you do not recycle already. I sincerely believe that every little bit counts, and one more plastic water bottle that is recycled is one less plastic water bottle floating in the ocean or washed up on the beach.

Humanity is so new in comparison to the Earth that is 4.6 billion years old. I don't think God intended for us to completely destroy his creation in the short span of 200,000 years that humans have been populating the Earth. As humans, we have the power of choice, and my choice has been to make an impact, even if it is on a small scale. We still have time to respect and love Earth as it has cherished and sustained humanity.

In God's name we pray. Amen.