

May 10, 2020

“Thoughts From a Sunday Walk”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Matthew 7:24-27

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As I'm sure you remember, last weekend we had much better weather than this weekend, with temperatures in the 60's. And after church, John and I went home, had some lunch, did a little yard work, and then we decided to go for a hike on a trail near Santuit Pond in Mashpee. So I wanted to tell you a little bit about our adventure, and some thoughts I had after reflecting on our walk.

The trail we took led us to the Santuit River. And there we saw literally thousands of river herring trying to make their way upstream, against the current, up into the pond to spawn. It really was an extraordinary sight to see this battle of the survival of the fittest. We watched as the fish first rested in some relatively calm water before making a run up the fish ladder to the pond. Some obviously made it, but others would bump into a rock or into one another, and then tumble back down, exhausted. And to make their ordeal even more difficult, hovering overhead were dozens of predator birds just waiting around for an easy meal. So we stayed there for a few minutes and then continued on. Soon, we came upon a bumblebee, or should I say bumblebees, collecting pollen from a huge willow bush. We quietly and carefully moved up close and personal with the bees, and we could see that they were loaded with so much yellow pollen under their bellies that it seemed they could just barely fly. It was so neat watching them work, moving from flower to flower gathering the pollen, and then flying off to wherever their nest was. The next sight we saw was one that many of us would classify as “yucky,” but still in all, it is part of God's plan and creation. A garter snake had caught a frog and was in the process of swallowing it when we happened upon it. So the snake froze completely still, waiting for us to pass. All you could see of the poor frog was just the lower part of its body and two big frog legs. I thought to myself, silly snake! Didn't he realize he was leaving the best part... the frog's legs? Now I've never eaten them myself, but I understand frog legs supposedly taste like chicken. But, I'll pass, thank you. Like I said, it was "yucky" but it still was fascinating to witness. As we walked along the trail we passed small ponds, and big ponds, and cranberry bogs, and beautiful vistas, and budding trees, and, of course, people. People, who, while adhering to the proper social distancing, were smiling and obviously happy to be outside, enjoying life and living, and enjoying the mysteries and wonders of God's creation. People, who after weeks of the same old bad news and bad weather, perhaps had their spirits lifted and renewed, at least for a few hours.

And this made me think about the words of that beautiful hymn, (*This Is My Father's World*): "This is my Father's world, I rest me in the thought, of rocks and trees, of skies and seas, his hand the wonders wrought. This is my Father's world, he shines in all that's fair; in the rustling grass I hear Him pass, he speaks to me everywhere. This is my Father's world, Oh, let me ne'er forget, that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet." Yes, God is the ruler yet! And from another great hymn, "For the beauty of the earth, for the glory of the skies, and especially for the love which from our birth, over and around us lies."

You see, the point I'm making here is that our human spirit needs reinforcement, needs to be uplifted once in a while. And what better way than through nature. Creation is meant to be savored because it is one way we make a connection to our Almighty God. The earth is the body of God, just as we are. And so, by savoring the delights of the earth, we connect to the divinity that flows through it... and through us. So now that it's spring and the weather is hopefully getting better, I think it's important for all of us to get outside. Walking, gardening, even now playing golf, whatever. To make that connection! To really see the beauty, the intricacies, the magnificence of God at work. Now, I know, some of us aren't all that mobile. But if you can even just sit outside on a chair or a bench, or just open a window and look outside, and feel the wind, and watch and hear the birds, and see the flowers and the new growth, you will still be able to make that divine connection. And my guess is, not only will you know that his eye is always on the sparrow, but you can be certain that he is also watching you!

Now besides connecting to God through nature, human interaction is the other great reinforcement and uplifting we need. During this pandemic crisis, that's obviously hard to make happen. But I know so many of you are doing your best to reach out to those who are alone with a note, a call, or an email. And that's so important and the Christ-like thing to do. Because you see, when we speak of the human spirit, we all know that it is a most fragile thing. There are times, like during this crisis, when our spirit languishes and can even be broken by that lack of interaction and, especially, touch. And we stop seeing the world with love and joy and through the eyes of God. Instead, we start seeing despair. That's a big part of what's happening today, as a sobering pessimism begins to pervade our lives. I saw an article the other day entitled, "Covid-19 could kill an extra 75,000 Americans through 'deaths of despair'" – drug or alcohol misuse and suicide. People begin to reflect on their own mortality, on those past hopes and expectations that were never realized, failures that suddenly seem magnified, and then self-doubt and self-condemnation start to set in. Or they worry about the future and their situation, and their fear overwhelms them. And it's obvious even many of us are beginning to feel some anger,

anxiousness and aloneness. That's why it's so important during this time to maintain structure, and to stay grounded on a firm foundation in our lives. And what foundation is better than that of our Christian faith? That's why Jesus is telling us in today's scripture that whoever hears his words and trust in them and lives them, has this assurance: that when the virus attacks, when the rains fall, and the floods come, and the winds blow, our house will not fall, our spirit will not be crushed, because it has been founded on a rock. A solid rock. Almighty God.

And this is so important for us to take to heart. Because the words and promises of our Lord offer us the opposite of pessimism and despair, they offer us peace, and strength, and courage, and comfort, and hope, and, above all, love. Let me repeat those words again: peace, and strength, and courage, and comfort, and hope, and above all, love. Why else would Jesus tell us again and again that he came to bring us life, abundant life? Why else would Jesus assure us that he has overcome the world? It's because God loves us!

And even though we may be alone and isolated and confined, we have a God who refuses to leave us alone because of his love. Just look at all the great parables and stories of Jesus. They're all about God being there for us when we're lost or troubled or hurting. We are the lost sheep he goes out and searches after. We are the wayward son who the father runs out to meet. We are the adulterous woman protected and forgiven. We are the parched woman at the well who is given living water. We are the barren fig tree that he promises to care for. We are even that person beaten down and left for dead in a ditch on the side of the road who is saved by someone we least expect – maybe even God. Yes, God is there for us always. I like the way C.S. Lewis expresses it. He said, "When I get to heaven I fully expect to stand before God and, in a grand moment of recognition, I will exclaim out loud, 'So it was you all along.' 'Everyone I ever loved, it was you. Every decent or fine thing that ever happened to me, it was you. Everything that made me reach out and try to be better, it was all you. It was you all along'"

Since it's still the Easter season, I want to take you back to the resurrection, to the garden and that moment when Mary recognized the risen Lord when he called her name. You heard Danna sing about it a few minutes ago. And wasn't it beautiful? So now, just imagine in your mind's eye meeting Jesus in your garden, or on a walk, or gazing out your window and watching creation before you. Imagine him walking with you, talking with you, assuring you that you are his own. Now imagine the joy, imagine the love. I can feel it. Can you?

And to think, all these thoughts started with a simple afternoon hike in Mashpee. Amen.