

Sunday Sermon Notes: August 9, 2015

As many of you might know, I was away the past few weeks. The last two weeks were time spent vacationing out west in New Mexico but before that I was serving as a chaplain at the Barbara C. Harris Camp. The BCH Camp is the Episcopal Camp for the Diocese of Massachusetts, tucked away amongst the sylvan hills of southern NH and near the town of Greenville NH. Yes, our camp is located not only in another diocese but another state.

With the blessing of neighboring dioceses, the camp benefits youth from New Hampshire and Western Massachusetts, drawing young people as well from parts of RI and CT. The camp is a gift and a blessings beyond our shores and I invite you all to come and visit, to invite our young people to participate in the various year-round offerings—to not only enjoy the rustic surroundings of the place but also to make friends within the Episcopal world.

I had a blast at camp, I canoed, shot at the archery range, participated in faith formation time, planned worship, ate food burnt over an open camp fire, played capture the flag, made a lanyard for my Swiss army knife...As you can tell, I had a swell time, as I think the young people did...That is my plug for the Barbara C Harris Camp.

Of the many special and powerful things I was a witness to, most important for me was when the young people were split up into small groups to discuss the Scripture lesson for the day. This time fit into an overall pattern of prayer, study, worship and, song that punctuated a day filled with activities, some of which I mentioned earlier, classic camp activities.

The overall theme for the two week session was entitled “Leap of Faith.” In the two weeks, faith formation time, about 70 minutes a day was spent pondering what this general concept, “Leap of Faith” meant to them. This time was guided by college age counselors, some from England, Scotland, and Wales. It was a time to explore a Scripture passage, reflect on a testimonial from a staff member, share ones thoughts with others, and begin to engage in some self-reflection in a safe environment.

The lessons built on each other, with the beginning lesson helping to start the exploration into what a leap of faith was and how it connected to faith in God. This was a build small exercise. This was a way for these middle school students to begin to explore theological concepts, give them names and define things like what is “faith.” The first lesson began with the passage from Acts 2:42-47...

They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

In my week at camp there were five lessons covered. The focus of the first lesson was to explore the leap of faith early Christians took when they sold everything and came together to form a community that lived together, prayed together, broke bread together and supported one another in this new way of life. Their experience in this new faith was an example for the campers of a “leap of faith.” The campers were asked then, for personal examples. Just to be at the camp for many was considered a leap of faith. It was a big unknown for many. Will I like this place? Will I make friends? Will this be fun? Will I miss my family? Will I learn something new? The list goes on. The idea was to solicit challenges where trust and faith in others was involved and then look to help them make the connection to the divine, to pose the question of where God might be in all of these big steps into the unknown and what is it beyond our own self that gives us the courage to make such decisions?

The first lesson was followed by the story of Moses and the burning bush. In this story from Exodus, Moses is called by God to lead his people to safety. It is also about how God promises Moses that he will be with him during all the challenges and uncertainty. The lesson to be grasped by the campers was that God helped

Moses to do what he called him to do. It is also about God being present for them when they meet challenges too vast and scary.

This lesson was followed by the story of Samuel being called by God to speak God's truth to others and to unite the Jewish people. Samuel was charged with sharing what he heard from God. But most importantly and for the sake of this faith formation exercise, God was present to Samuel to help him speak his compelling message. God is present for us when we are called to speak the truth.

The next lesson was from the Gospel of Mark. It was the story of the Widow's offering of two copper coins at the temple and the generosity of spirit this humble gift represented. A gift steeped in love and thankfulness of what God had given the widow. God was present to her and would take care of her. It was a story selected that modeled how we are to give and how God is pleased when our faith and trust in him is generous.

And finally, from 2 Corinthians 9: 6-12 we discussed what it means to be a cheerful giver and how this translates into a bountiful harvest in return.

These weekly lessons in this week served several purposes. In a way it was part Bible boot-camp, where practical matters were learned like basic Bible literacy but more importantly it got them to engage that "God thing." What does it mean to have faith? What does it mean to take a leap of faith? These days and weeks for the campers were about learning, exploring, and hopefully equipping them to start a journey of faith.

The formation lessons were and are built on foundational concepts that lead to a real and robust understanding of faith. The lesson today, where Jesus tells the people that, he is the bread of life and that whoever comes to him will never hunger, and whoever believes in him will never thirst directs us towards the biggest leap. Whoever believes in this concept, in this theological metaphor, will have eternal life. This is what our faith as Christians ultimately directs us towards. This is the ultimate leap of faith. We strive for this leap of faith. To believe, as we are invited by Jesus in this passage, will lead us into a life eternal through him.

Now this is a big ask for a young person to accept—this concept we know as eternal life. It is a big challenge for adults to understand and grasp as well! Effort was spent in guided conversation to help them find ways, language and examples of what faith means to them using personal examples to be shared with the group.

An example of a leap of faith for one young man was in sitting by a lone classmate at lunch-time. For another, a leap of faith was in selecting a less-than gifted athlete to join his team at recess. For most, this exercise was the start of making connections while deepening their understanding that personal actions can be somethings larger.

In an effort to bring the theme of the summer home, the concept of a “leap of faith” was not left to the conceptual but was also engaged in the actual. The activities included swimming, canoeing, archery...but in the ropes course there was a tangible way to test out an actual leap of faith. The fear of heights, the fear of falling, trust in others to belay them, these were acutely real ways to engage in the faith of reliance on others. Developing and identifying personal examples of taking risks helped in their growing understanding of their faith. These activities were meant to be fun but they also helped to reinforce the theme of their time at the Barbara C. Harris Camp.

During faith formation time, I was struck by the simplicity of their examples of faith and trust and their willingness to try new and challenging things. My time at camp was a renewal for me of what faith means. For me, a leap in faith has been about big things, changing vocations, moving across country to a new place, ending relationships and starting new ones but I learned it is also about the little special things, that are ultimately really big things, like sitting down with someone at lunch who is alone, paying a compliment to a stranger, giving generously to a victim of a natural disaster far across the globe, making bag lunches for the homeless. These were a few of the examples offered up by the campers and ones that through my adult eyes are examples of faith in God’s presence. A faith that comes from and acceptance that in Jesus, the bread of life, there is hope in the present and hope in the future.

Ultimately, I think this is where the conversation, started in the first Scripture reading from Acts these young people were exposed to at the start of their time at camp is leading to—understanding Jesus as the bread of life. It takes small steps, many steps to begin to understand the message brought to life by Christ.

How grateful I am to have been a part of the experience—to help be a guide in the beginning steps in faith formation. But the ability to help participate like this is not limited to chaplains, deacons, counselors, and priests. It is open to all of us. For many at camp their journey is starting and will hopefully lead them to places like St. John's Church where the initial steps in faith formation can continue to mature and where on-going support can be experienced.

Just as the early Christians took a leap of faith and shared everything they had with each other and much like the young people that went to camp, we too all have taken a leap of faith to be here at St John's. And so like the campers of the Barbara C. Harris Camp, let us support one another as we grow in body, mind, and spirit. We too can benefit from a life of examining where these leaps of faith occur. We no doubt have many of these moments in our everyday life but I learned and I think the young people up in NH learned of the importance of connecting those moments, those actions to God's presence. It is in making these connections, engaging in theological reflection that true spiritual growth occurs and is a sign and reflection of a mature and steadfast faith.

Amen.