

HEAD FOR THE SKY

Sermon preached by the Rev. Barbara E. Davis

May 23, 2010

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:4-11; Acts 2:1-21

A few months ago, around the time confirmation classes started, I came across an article in the New York Times about tree climbing.¹ I grew up climbing trees as a regular past time in rural Pennsylvania, but it is a rather odd thing to connect with New York City. The article began by highlighting that dissonance, pointing to the fact that climbing trees in New York City parks is considered disorderly conduct. It then went on to tell the story of an amazing program for young adults that teaches how to care for, prune, and climb trees as part of an intensive job training program. The participants come from some of the most unlikely neighborhoods in New York City, neighborhoods that are full of brick and concrete rather than trees. Now in its second year, the program is meant to train these thirty-three participants, who were selected from over four-hundred applicants, to join the “green-collar” workforce; and indeed, many of the first year participants now work for the New York City Housing Authority, the Prospect Park Alliance, Wave Hill and the Central Park Conservatory.

Part of the training this year included a visit from Mark Chisholm, a professional tree climber who has won two world championships in tree climbing. If I had known in my youth that tree climbing could be a profession, I suspect I may have at least considered another career path, the lure of being among the branches was so great in my childhood. Remembering this passion made it easy for me to relate to the awe the trainees must have felt learning from his experience, the article describes them as star-struck as they watched him navigate the branches with speed and agility. He left them not only with this image but with three basic rules to follow: 1) Check your equipment for flaws and check out the tree for problems, from the roots to the branches. 2) Map out your climb. 3) Head for the sky.

As the confirmation class experienced this spring, these rules are also applicable to our journeys of faith. These nine youth started the confirmation process in late January, with an equipment check and with a map. The very first exercise I lead with our confirmation classes is called a Faith Journey Map. It is based on a project created by William Willimon in his Making Disciples² confirmation curriculum and is created by each youth with these instructions:

Faith is something that changes; as people of faith, we recognize that our faith isn't something that we are going to “figure out” and then not think about anymore. Being faithful means exploring our faith over a whole lifetime. Today we're going to consider how our faith has changed over time.

Divide your paper into sections representing every 2-3 years of your life

In each section list:

Names of the places where you have lived during those years

Any dates that represent significant national events or events in the life of your family – it might be the birth of a sibling, the death of a grandparent, an important national event, and so forth.

Something you accomplished or feel happy about from that time period

Name the people who are/were important to you at that time

Draw pictures, write sentences that indicate something about how your FAITH was being shaped in those years – did you go to church? Did you read bible stories with your grandmother? Did you say prayers before bed? Did you attend church camp? Did someone in your family die?

Take a moment to finish your faith journeys. Look over what you have created. How would you describe in one or two words the “shape” of your journey?

This group of thirteen and fourteen year olds had an amazing amount of breadth in their faith influences. These are our youth who were in Pre-K and Kindergarten on September 11, 2001; these are our youth who have known our country to be at war for most of their lives; these are our youth who were strongly impacted by the hopeful message of President Obama’s election. They come from diverse backgrounds and have been strongly influenced by older and younger siblings, transitions related to moving, the shaping of new friendships, and deaths of grandparents, relatives, friends and pets. They are also largely children of this church, they have grown up among you; their parents are active elders, deacons, church school teachers, and youth leaders.

The tree of faith they are checking for problems in its roots and branches is familiar to them, which allowed them a great amount of confidence as they debated among themselves on the topics we discussed throughout the winter and spring. We discussed the difference between believing in the Bible and believing in God’s living presence which is revealed in the Bible. We read several large sections of Mark’s Gospel together, which gave us an opportunity to talk about discipleship, Jesus’ divine power, and miracles. I asked them to draw pictures of what they thought God looked like when they were three and what they think God looks like now – which revealed that Jesus was a big influence on their three-year old minds and that their image of God has evolved into something less concrete.

I asked them to pick their favorite image of Jesus from a wide selection of modern visual art, which revealed their preference for colorful images and the humanity of Jesus. The images not selected were of an angry Christ, Christ and the Children, and head of Christ that they described as “too artsy.” We discussed the meaning of communion, with a series of questions like “Who may receive the meal?” and “When you get ready to take communion, what are you thinking or praying about?” Their answers revealed their openness. “Anyone who needs it may receive communion” and their awareness of God’s grace as they revealed their prayerful thoughts during communion relating to sin and forgiveness, mercy and love, and the questions on their hearts.

We talked about Baptism and Grace, and the history of Christianity and the Reformation, as we re-enacted Luther nailing his ninety-five thesis to the door in Wittenberg.

The youth talked about their desire for silence in worship and how they think the purpose of worship is to celebrate God, relax and not to lose hope. They completed a lengthy timeline of the history of this church based on the brief history you can read on the website or pick up in the lobby; they learned about our connection with the sons of liberty, the debate over hymnals and musical instruments, and heard the names of Jonathan Edwards, William Jennings Bryan, and Harry Emerson Fosdick. They listened to me explain how Presbyterians govern themselves

“decently and in order” and they sustained their questions throughout the process by nourishing themselves with Oreo cookies and pizza.

I am happy to share with you that they are sound thinkers who ask intriguing questions. They have a mixture of opinions about the relationship between tradition and trying new things in worship and their study of their faith. I share all of this with you, however, not to have it be a report card of their progress, because frankly they have been ready to head for the sky all along. I share their process with you because I want to share with you what I believe we can learn from them.

First, their curiosity should be an inspiration to us. They constantly asked questions and debated the answers among themselves. Several parents said to me as they passed the homework along that they wanted to be in the confirmation process too! There are many opportunities here at First Presbyterian Church to explore your own faith, think about doing something you have never done before – come to an educational event or consider if you might like the opportunity to teach church school. Look at our website for mission opportunities or read the web-exclusive book reviews and consider adding one to your summer reading list, or make your own faith journey map and think about what you want to explore about our tradition in the coming year.

Second, don’t make the mistake of thinking our youth are speaking some other language than we are. The Pentecost story is an example of how we can overcome this obstacle. The wonder of the gift of the Spirit is that we can connect across whatever barriers stand between us. These nine youth may sometimes sounds to us like Galileans, but the Spirit has given them great ability, we just need to notice, despite whatever other languages they speak – from Latin to French to Arabic to text, that they also speak in a way we can understand if we are willing to engage the spirit ourselves and listen.

Finally, it is common to talk about the youth as the future of the church, and I see a great deal of hope in that outlook. However, we must be cautious, confining them to that role, because the youth are also the now of the church. They are not interested in waiting to build this institution; they are interested in being involved right here and right now. They have not checked their equipment and the tree before them to stand motionless at the roots waiting their turn. They are ready to head for the sky. What they need is opportunity.

If we in the community of faith know about anything, it is opportunity. A majority of Jesus’ teaching were about opportunity. We’ll speak that belief in a moment in our affirmation of faith: “Jesus proclaimed the reign of God: and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the broken-hearted, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe in the gospel.”

One of the best examples of the kind of opportunity Jesus teaches about relates back to the tree climbing metaphor. I’m sure some of you remember the story of Zacchaeus in the Gospel of Luke:

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.’ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ³

Not everyone is happy about Jesus giving Zacchaeus this opportunity, but Jesus is clear that the opportunity he extends for discipleship is never limited. It is for the here and now. Zacchaeus' tree-climbing antics exhibit his strengths: his curiosity, his willingness to do whatever is needed to get a view of Jesus.

This kind of relentless curiosity is the core of discipleship. It is what each of us and our youth bring to the table of fellowship in our community. Tree climbing may not seem like an instant metaphor for the journey of faith, but the tools needed for both include a desire to learn, they employ the importance of surveying the environment, the tradition and the present. They encourage good planning and mapping out a scheme. Finally, we have to move upward.

The Spirit is moving over this place, the youth who have just been through the confirmation process are ready to proceed, their invitation is clear, will we join them? Our opportunity is at hand, let's head for the sky!

¹ “Learning to Climb New York City’s Trees,” by Sam Dolnick. February 14, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/15/nyregion/15tree.html>

² Willimon, William H. Making Disciples: Mentor’s Guide. (Logos Productions; Inner Grove Heights: MN. 1997) p. 41-43.

³ Luke 19:1-6 (NRSV)