

Worship for May 14, 2023
Sixth Sunday of Easter

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

*Call to Worship

We gather together in worship.

as a mother calls her family around the table.

A loving, nurturing God,

Who, like a mother, loves us unconditionally,

teaches us in the way we should go,

and comforts us in times of need.

All praise be to God,

the source and sustainer of life.

Prayer of the Day

We bless your name, O Lord,

for sending your own incarnate Son,

to become part of a family,

so that, as he lived his life on earth,

he may experience life's worries and joys.

We ask you, Lord,

to protect and watch over all our families,

so that in the strength of your grace,

its members may enjoy the priceless gift of your presence and peace,

and, as the Church alive in the home,

bear witness in this world to your glory.

In the name of Christ, our brother, Amen.

*Hymn 14 For the Beauty of the Earth, Verses 1-3

Prayer of Confession

Eternal God, in whom we live and move and have our being,

whose face is hidden from us by our own sins,

and whose mercy we forget in the blindness of our hearts:

Cleanse us from all offenses,

and deliver us from proud thoughts and vain desires,

that with humble hearts we may draw near to you,

confessing our faults, confiding in your grace,

and finding refuge and strength, through Jesus Christ your Son. Amen.

*Hymn Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Pardon

Hear the good news!

Who is in a condition to condemn?

Only Christ,

And Christ died for us,

Christ rose for us,

Christ reigns in power for us,

Christ prays for us.

Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation.

The old life is gone and a new life is begun.

Know you are forgiven and be at peace. Amen.

First Reading 1 Peter 3:13-22

Time for Young Disciples

Reading from Scripture John 14:15-21

The Morning Message

I have vivid memories of the days before mandatory seatbelts and child safety seats. We were not a seatbelt kind of family, which could be the subject of therapy. My dad would stuff them down deep between the seats of his baby blue LTD because he thought the buckles were only good for marring the car's upholstery.

But, we still had a restraint system...it came by way of an arm flung out across the seat to keep whoever was in the front seat from flying head first into the dashboard. Thank goodness we have evolved since those days.

Leonard Sweet, prolific preacher and writer, calls mothers "the original seat belt." I have found myself doing the same thing whenever I come to a sudden stop. I sweep my arm out, like my mother and my grandmother did, whenever I perceive a sudden threat while driving. Even though we all know it would be wholly ineffective in an accident on today's crowded, roaring, over-driven roads, it is still a gesture of love to me, tucked deep into my memory.

What gesture, or phrase, or activity speaks love to you? Murray Bowen wrote the textbook on Family Systems Theory. He says, "Watch what people do, not what they say." You've heard that before. The credit goes to Bowen.

An outward gesture of care is the culmination of words made flesh and ideas put into action. It is one of the constant challenges for Christians: how will we engage in actions that demonstrate what we believe about love, hope, confession, forgiveness, redemption, regeneration?

Yesterday our fellowship hall was full...of women gathered to do what church women have done for ages...welcome a new baby into the fold and surround his or her mother with love and support, to celebrate with the family. Cake, coffee, presents, and punch were there as were the things we could not see: faith, hope, joy and a whole lot of love.

I love it when nature, we can call that God, plops a sermon right before my eyes.

Last spring, Ed discovered a couple of robins were building a nest on the ledge outside our kitchen window. He confessed he didn't know what it was at first and swept and hosed it down. Then, he witnessed those tenacious birds re-constructing a nest. Now he was in protection-mode.

Soon we could see one of the birds flying up to the windowsill with a mouthful of twig or a dollop of mud. One of nature's masterpieces began to take shape in the corner of our window, and we found ourselves drawn to it repeatedly during the day. Mostly an earthy brown, to disguise the little home, we noticed that this robin family was into contemporary nest architecture...around the base of the nest were long strips of something that looked like the backing of our pool cover, providing a foundation of blue and white stripes.

One morning Ed reported there was one brilliant blue egg in the nest. I had to climb up on the pool deck to see into the nest. What I noticed first was that the blue and white fabric strips were serving as camo of the base of the nest against our white window frames. Smart birds.

The robins took their place on the nest to brood. We went to the Google machine to read up on robins. We learned that both male and female, mama and daddy robins, build and shelter. We have witnessed it. If we made a sudden movement in the kitchen, turned on the overhead light, or make a noise, the bird flew away, but, just a few feet to the railing around the back deck. They were right back when the threat was over.

Soon there were two blue eggs in the nest and the birds are spending even more time there, waiting, waiting, making plans for feeding those hungry mouths and teaching those babies to survive outside the home that had protected them thus far. Eventually, there were four eggs in the nest.

When they hatched, we witnessed a real labor of love, as the momma and daddy birds brought food and deposited it into these little beaks. It was days before their eyes opened. And soon they began the hard work of teaching them to fly.

Oh, my goodness, what lessons we saw, as they taught them to perch on the rim of the nest and make the short flight to the deck just a few feet away. We witnessed them leave the nest, one by one, until there was only one left. And then something really remarkable happened. Not only did the parent birds continue to urge that baby out of the nest, the others the brothers or sisters would appear and coax that reluctant bird. You could almost hear them, “C’mon. You can do it!?” And eventually, day after the others, it balanced on the rim of the nest. One foot attached and one wobbling in the air while testing the proverbial winds.

And then it sailed. Just a few feet at first. And then up, up, and away to places we won’t see or imagine.

Like I said, I love it when God sends me a sermon and this one was all gift-wrapped. The connection is obvious, isn’t it? This is Mother’s Day and the season of graduations. Most of us have made that move from nest to the wide world already. We made it. We succeeded. Many of us have passed the baton to the next generation in our professions and roles.

Last year we had many, but, we have no new graduates this year. This year we can congratulate young people, a neighbor or family member, around us for accomplishing their academic, vocational goals. They should be celebrated. A friend of mine is at Princeton Theological Seminary this weekend for the graduation of her daughter. It hardly seems possible. We watched this young person learn to ride a two-wheeler!

Tempus fugit. Time flies. Her future is before her. So much has changed and more changes will come. The way in which her parents relate to her will change. It’s inevitable. And someday soon, this new grad and all the rest taking that big step into the future, will write our laws, pave our streets, teach our students, diagnose our ailments, and sell us groceries.

It’s their time. For the parents who have raised them, it’s their time, too. Time for a change.

Moms and dads have prayed, planned, anticipated, welcomed and celebrated their children. They have educated, evaluated, and vaccinated. They have hosted play dates, scrutinized car dates, marked milestone dates. They have loved wholly and completely, even sacrificially, always unconditionally, even if that love was tested.

We rarely use the word “success” in church conversation because it seems prideful. But, I will break that taboo today because you mothers and fathers, and those who were like parents, need to hear, you need to feel, you need to celebrate your success in raising your family, even if those days are far behind you. I would tell parents of the newly-launched to take a trip, if they have any funds left after writing those tuition checks. Or take up a new interest. Write that book they have always wanted to pen. Replace the bunk beds with a treadmill and weights.

We bought a treadmill. We hang clothes on it.

To the newly empty-nested, don't fall into the trap of thinking that your service has ended, your contributions are not needed, your joy is complete. Because it's not. If you can't figure it out, call me or call a counselor. You can figure out the next steps. Mother Teresa said there's always someone's porch to be swept. Start there. See where God is at work in the world and join God there. Take your broom.

In this gospel text, we are in the front seat with Jesus. And it is Jesus who puts his arm around us in the face of what is to come. “Little children,” he says, “you cannot go where I am going.” And then, in the text, Jesus uses both words and actions to prepare his friends for his absence, He washes their feet. He offers them bread. He prepares them for the harsh reality of the next days. He prays for their future. Like a father. Like a mother.

We don't know everything that the future holds, but, we know who holds that future. It is bigger, more expansive, with more opportunities than we can ever know or imagine. When our youngest daughter was five, according to a little booklet made in kindergarten, her chosen profession was to be a “dolphin-chaser” and be on Jeopardy! She also wanted to live with Mommy and Daddy forever. She changed her mind about that. Today she is a pediatric nurse in an endoscopy clinic in Raleigh, NC. Did we envision that for her future? Of course not. But we believe God did and does guide her through all the stages of life.

Like I said, it's a big, wide, vast, important, needy, hurting, exciting world out there. It is a gift of love from God to us. We may not be actively parenting these days, but we can support those who are. Listen to their concerns, celebrate the milestones, and imagine with them how their children's or grandchildren's future will unfold. What professional direction will they take? To what purpose might God call them?

I'm pretty sure God could still use some dolphin-chasers!

*Hymn 14 For the Beauty of the Earth, Verses 4 and 5

Affirmation of Faith The Apostles' Creed
*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns
Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Gifts of Tithes and Offering
Offertory
*Hymn 607 Doxology
*Prayer of Dedication

*Hymn 92 While We Are Waiting, Come
*Blessing
Go out into the blessing of a new week.
As Christ prays for you, pray for one another.
As Christ forgives you, forgive one another.
As Christ loves you, love one another.
And may the grace of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
go with you today and always. Amen.

*Postlude