

Rev. Lynne Ogren Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, Montana
June 17, 2020 3rd Sunday after Pentecost, Year A Matthew 10:24-39

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

I started reading a new book this week titled with a question, “The End of Youth Ministry?” It’s written by a Luther Seminary professor, Andrew Root, who takes a look how the church has been trying to minister to our young people with youth group and mission trips and occasional service projects. The author wonders why we segregate our teens from the rest of the congregation, enticing them with fun activities, and sneaking in a little bit of Jesus to fulfill our responsibility to minister to them as they grow in faith.

In a class I took online this spring, I learned that the word “adolescence” didn’t even exist until about 100 years ago when psychologist G. Stanley Hall began to study childhood development and evolutionary theory. He identified the years of transition from childhood to adulthood as a distinct phase in human development and named it “adolescence.”

Our gospel reading this week got me to thinking about the rites of passage that different cultures use to help young people move from childhood to adulthood. I did a little Google search and found a couple of stories.

In North Baffin Island, north of Hudson Bay, Inuit boys have traditionally gone out to the wilderness with their fathers between the ages of 11 and 12 to test their hunting skills and get used to the harsh arctic weather. As part of the tradition, a shaman would be called to open the lines of communication between men and animals.

These days this tradition has been extended to young girls as well. “Outcamps” are established away from the community to teach the young men and women the traditional skills of their culture.¹

In the Cherokee tradition, a boy’s father takes him into the forest, blindfolds him and leaves him alone. He is told to sit on a stump all night until he feels the warmth of the morning sun. He cannot call out for help no matter how scared he feels listening to all kinds of noises and imagining the wild animals that could easily attack, or even thinking about how easy it would be for another person to sneak up on him.

Finally, after sitting on that stump, in the dark, with only his fear and determination, when the boy senses the rising sun, he can remove his blindfold. And there he finds his father sitting on the stump next to him, having kept watch all night to protect his son.²

In our American culture, some rites of passage include getting a driver’s license and graduating from high school. In the church, Confirmation, or Affirmation of Baptism, serves as a rite of passage when young people are instructed and invited to claim the faith of their baptism as their own.

¹ <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/13-amazing-coming-of-age-traditions-from-around-th/>

² https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/nrcs141p2_015565.pdf

The gospel readings in these first three weeks of Ordinary Time tell about a rite of passage for Jesus' disciples. Jesus is preparing to send them out on their first mission trip.

The verses that we skipped between last week and today³ told them not to take any extra clothing or food or even a walking stick, which could also serve as a weapon, if needed. Take nothing with you, Jesus said, and accept whatever welcome you are given from those you meet—even if that means you are rejected.

Today he tells them three times not to be afraid. Usually, that means there will be something to be afraid of! Jesus warns that the missionary life can be dangerous and even lead to divisions with those closest to them.

This mission is a rite of passage as the disciples transition into the role of apostles—those who are sent by God to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of heaven and bring Christ's healing and life to others.

What does that all have to do with youth ministry? When the term “adolescence” took hold in the early 1900's, specific programs for teenagers began to develop, including in the life of the church. As a result of this segregation from both younger children and adults, basically the rest of the church community, teenagers started drifting away from the church and the faith it taught and practiced.

By focusing in on teenagers, separate from the other generations, we remove both their mentors and their opportunity to mentor others.

This time between childhood and adulthood is when we instruct our youth with more intention than at any other time. We ask them to make a commitment to the faith in which they were baptized. And then we hope they will actually live out that faith, even as their lives become busier with the demands of all the activities they have to choose from.

We want our young people to be prepared for the world they will meet when they leave home and make their own way. And that world can be harsh and scary. How can we prepare them, challenge them, and support them in this transitional time of adolescence?

Jesus reminded his disciples that they need to be like their teacher. Jesus, of course, is our teacher, first and foremost. And he lives in the midst of communities of faith. That means that the adults in our congregation serve as the Body of Christ, as representatives of our Teacher, Jesus, for our young people. These are the relationships we need to encourage and nurture.

Then Jesus tells the disciples, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” We must acknowledge a healthy fear of God's power to heal and to destroy, to build up and to tear down. God would not be God if he was not all-powerful.

³ Matthew 10:9-23

But Jesus goes on to say, that this One who can destroy both our body and our soul also knows us so well that he knows the number of hairs on our head. Our God who is aware of every sparrow that falls to the ground, is surely even more aware of and cares even more for each one of his children.

Like the Cherokee father who kept watch as his son sat through the night, God is always beside us to watch over us as we face our fears and challenges.

The passage from our gospel reading about the divisions in families is a difficult part to read. This is where it is important that our congregation provide places for us to wrestle with God's word together—with each generation asking their questions from their own perspectives. Where do we hear God's law and where do we hear God's gospel—the good news of grace, mercy, and hope?

We can trust that God speaks to us through Scripture and through the voices of those we know and trust as fellow believers, even those of different generations.

We experience rites of passage from one phase of life to another at different ages. It's important that we share these changes in our community of faith, across generations, to journey as Christ's apostles together. Learning to be like our teacher, Jesus Christ, is an ongoing lesson.

With the assurance of God's love and care, may we find ways to learn and grow together, so that, as we are sent into the world, we are ready and eager to share the good news of God's love and promises with those we meet.

Thanks be to God! Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Called into unity with one another and the whole creation, let us pray for our shared world.

A brief silence.

Expansive God, you bring diverse voices together to form your church. Open our hearts and unstop our ears to learn from one another, that differences might not overshadow our baptismal unity. Guide all who speak your word of justice, especially Bradn Buerkle serving as a Lutheran missionary in Russia. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Providing God, your creation shows us that life comes from death. Renew the places where our land, air, and waterways have been ill for too long. We pray especially for places where summer wildfires have flared up, and for the safety of people and wildlife. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Protecting God, sustain and keep safe all who work to defend others across the world, especially those in active military service, and the scientists and medical researchers working for a vaccine and treatment for the coronavirus. Help all nations to share their resources and knowledge with developing countries who are ill-equipped to deal with this virus. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Compassionate God, you are with us and we are never alone. Bless all fathers and father figures who strive to love and nurture as you do. Comfort all who long to be fathers and all for whom this day is difficult. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Reigning God, you bless us with guides and caretakers in the faith. As we give thanks for those who have died, increase our care for one another, especially across the generations, until we walk with them in newness of life. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Receive these prayers, O God, and those too deep for words; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.