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**Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Year B**

**Tenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper
12)**



Common Lectionary

2 Samuel 11:1-15 with Psalm 14 or
2 Kings 4:42-44 with Psalm 145:10-18
Ephesians 3:14-21
John 6:1-21

The Mill Creek Park system because of Volney Rogers is full of sites that help me understand my unique Youngstown heritage. Whenever I am near a Park site, I visit. Not only do I visit to once again be awed by the wonder of creation, I visit to learn about the history of this nation and that area. I visit to expand my worldview. And I visit to support this vital resource we are lucky enough to have and I visit to remind myself to pray and work toward the hope of maintaining this resource for future generations.

Recently, I was attending a family reunion in Youngstown and got to visit and explore once again that great gift in Youngstown, Ohio. I recalled ice skating at Newport and boating on Lake Glaser by Calvary Cemetery where so many relatives are remembered.

Hemlock trees are very unique. Most reproduce as part of a family circle, but occasionally seeds that fall on fresh mineral soil will germinate. Those lone, isolated trees never grow as tall as the trees in a family group. And they will only grow in soil that has been exposed by flooding, fire, or wind. It is only out of destruction that a lone redwood can be born. Hemlock seeds are small; their cones are only an inch long and it would take 100,000 seeds to weigh a pound. But one tiny seed from one tiny cone is enough to grow the tallest species of tree in the Park.

To me, this is the perfect real-world metaphor for Jesus and his followers. We know that Jesus spent most of his earthly ministry attempting to share stories in order to instruct the disciples in his ways. However, there were times when the disciples had to live these stories themselves in order to get the full meaning. They had to be exposed in order to learn. In many ways, the disciples are like the little redwood seeds that could. The example we have in John's gospel provides two opportunities for the disciples to witness Jesus' divinity up-close and in person.

Jesus is planning to show them what faith in God looks and acts like and the disciples are playing right into Christ's hands. The first portion of the Gospel story is one of abundance born out of scarcity. This portion

of John's gospel starts with the feeding of the five thousand. This is the only miracle of Jesus that appears in all four gospels, and it's the story that underscores the message in the rest of the chapter of John.

Eventually, if we read on, we will come to understand that Jesus needed to feed the five thousand in order for the disciples and his followers to see that Jesus was the Bread of Life himself, and that as the Bread of Life, Jesus would need to be broken so that his love could be shared broadly. I think it's important to note that the folks who gathered to hear Jesus preach weren't trouble makers, they were faithful people. These were people who were seeking more nourishment from Jesus, nourishment from his words and his presence. And to illustrate this fact, Jesus literally feeds them all. He feeds them to illustrate that he himself is bread for the world, and that he would not be the powerful and controlling leader that they desired him to be. So, when it appears that the crowd will come and take Jesus by force to fulfill their desire of a mighty king, Jesus runs away. He runs away not to abandon the people he loved, rather he runs away to realize God's true calling on his life. Jesus is not to be a mighty and militant ruler, he is to be a holy and living sacrifice for his contemporaries and for the entirety of humankind.

During his flight, Jesus sends the disciples on a boat out toward Capernaum. He must have let them know that he'd be catching up to them in some way because the disciples are content to leave without him. I imagine that none of them could have predicted what happened next. You see, the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand can be explained away by the assumption of scarcity. What they had originally in the five loaves and two fish was what they collected from nearby. They had no way of knowing how many loaves and fishes were with the multitudes. Jesus' act of dividing and sharing the food set an example for others to do the same so that in the end, there was an abundance of food for all. The miracle here is Jesus' example.

Yet, Jesus was soon to perform another miracle for another reason. Once the disciples were on the boat, the wind began to pick up. When the wind picked up, the disciples became afraid. Their only comfort was that Jesus walked out on the waves to be with them. Why did Jesus have to do these back to back miracles? Because the authorities could argue against the authenticity of the miracle of feeding the five thousand, but no one could argue against Jesus' divinity after they saw him walking on water. Jesus performed this miracle to bring his divinity close to his followers so that they would really know and believe - but believe on God's terms.

Both of these miracles come alive for me when we celebrate communion. When we come to God's holy table - we come on God's terms and not on our own. God welcomes us to the table so that we can witness Jesus' full humanity and divinity at once. Jesus needed to allow himself to be broken so that we could fully live out his story alongside of the disciples. Jesus

nourishes us with bread for the journey, using himself as a sacrifice to feed and save us all.

I saw examples of this type of sacrifice taking place in nature when I was at Mill Creek.

It is unique in that it still holds multiple groves of Oak & Hemlock trees. These groves are known as family groups or sometimes as cathedrals. In many ways, a cathedral of trees is a representation of Jesus and the disciples. Cathedrals of oaks are simply trees that have grown up from the remains of a fallen and isolated tree. Remember, that isolated tree had to fight to get there in the first place. For every 100,000 seeds that drop from a Redwood, only one or two will germinate in that exposed and raw soil. The cathedral trees grow up out of the isolated tree known as the shard. The shard has to break down to host the new trees, which grow out of its perimeter and form a circle around it. Eventually, the shard itself dies, but the genetic information of the surrounding cathedral trees is identical from the stump they sprang out of.

Cathedrals of trees are sturdier than isolated trees. They can grow taller and survive longer because they help to anchor one another. Some trees have very shallow root systems. Cathedral groups weave their roots together, so if one tree is slightly uprooted, the other trees in the system will help it to keep standing. Isolated trees often do not survive catastrophic events, but cathedrals do. They share nutrients in times of scarcity and give off oxygen and nutrients to the soil in times of abundance.

As a great lover of creation, John Muir grew up memorizing the Bible, but he never went to church. He said that being among the cathedral trees in the forests was like being in his own personal sanctuary. It is not astonishing to me that he felt that these majestic trees pointed the way to God. Discovering that trees have strength in being in gathered community with interwoven roots felt like church to me as well. Jesus drew attention to his divine acts on earth to remind us that there are miracles all around us in our daily lives.

Americans are ferocious individualists. We glorify the single, the personal, and the independent. And while there is no "I" in "team," we don't seem to care about this. We prefer the pronouns of "me" and "mine" over "us" or "ours." This has been true of the American psyche from the beginning.

The Founding Fathers were children of the Enlightenment, champions of individual liberty, determined to cast off all

traditional forms of hierarchy. Isolated thereafter for a century and a half by massive oceans, America grew up to be more self-centered than other nations, nations forced by geography to interact with multiple neighbors. For all its benefits, our “rugged individualism” is not without fault. We are motivated by what is best for us personally, not communally. We choose solitude over solidarity. We cling to personal freedom at the expense of the common good. We venerate the single over the social, and would rather compete than cooperate.

This approach to living is completely unheard of outside the West. In Africa and Asia, for example, the individual is only thought to exist inside a larger community. The Nguni Bantu term is “ubuntu,” roughly translated, “I am because WE are.” So foundational is this concept, that in many tribal cultures, a child isn’t considered “alive” until he or she is named and presented to the community.

This turns the Western approach on its head, for we have been arguing about conception and the beginning of life for about five decades. But for five millennia, a greater portion of the world has never questioned it: “You don’t exist until you have a place to belong.” This affirms the obvious fact, that you are not the center of the world, but a small part of it (and if this unsettles you, it says more about your own individualism than the values of another culture).



Opening ourselves to a sort of “community correction,” would be healthy. Humankind (Americans or otherwise) is a relationship-driven species. We thrive, not in isolation, but in affiliation. I’ve often made the anecdotal observation that those with broad, diverse friendships are those with the most welcoming hearts. It’s not accidental. When you connect with others, especially those who are different from you, it becomes increasingly difficult to hate, marginalize, stigmatize, or besmirch entire groups of people. Stereotypes simply collapse in the face of knowledge and meaningful relationships.

Writing as a person of faith, and as a follower of the Christ who built a longer table instead of higher fences, it is demanded of me to protect human dignity; to reconstruct civility; to work tirelessly to incubate friendships; and to welcome others into healthy, mutually connected community.

As William P. Young says, “Most of our hurts come through relationships – but our healing will come through relationships as well.” As beings made in the image of God, when we help others belong, and we

“strengthen the ties that bind” instead of tearing people apart, that’s as Divine an act as is humanly possible.

If anyone is heading across I 80, I invite you to get off in Youngstown, take a drive through the park and by all means stop at a Handels Ice Cream for a delightful custard. My fav is the chocolate pecan and butter pecan. Class Reunion will have me there again in August to relish the park and Handels once again.