

John Sampson
"Finding Gratitude"
Text: Numbers 21:4 - 9
Preached at KVCC
March 11, 2018

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you our rock and our redeemer.

This morning we move further along on our journey of Lent.

Now I've been sharing since we began that our Lenten path is a journey where we consciously and intentionally look at the ways we can fail each other, fail ourselves, and fail living into the dream that God has for her all of children.

And it's in this spirit that I want to share with you something I heard this past week.

On Tuesday evening I attended the second meeting the group SURJ, Standing Up for Racial Justice, hosted for members of our town, and beyond, to come together and discuss racism. These meetings have been a response to a racist post shared on social media by a young woman from our town.

During the meeting a large group of us wanted to better understand what might motivate someone to make a post like the one our community has been discussing for the past number of weeks. Why would someone write the things that were written, especially given that the person who did it is known to be a loving and compassionate person by her friends, family, and those of us here in town who know her. Are other youth in our community doing similar things? Have we, as a community, missed signs of this kind of behavior right in front of our faces? And what can we do moving ahead to create an environment where racism is not acceptable on any level in our school, and beyond?

And the answers that the youngest members of the discussion gave to these questions were surprising to me. They were shocking and they were heart wrenching.

The youth who were there in the meeting spoke of a life experience so different from the one you and I might have. Theirs is an experience where they are flooded by social media, and what they see on the Internet to a degree I did not appreciate. Where we might say we live in Keene Valley, our youth might say they live on Snapchat, or Facebook, or Twitter. Where we might share what our friend told us when we met them at the Village Grocer, our youth might more readily tell us what their friend who lives in CA, a friend they have only met online, told them in a private group chat.

But what was shocking to me was not so much how deeply embedded our youth are in their virtual lives, but what they find there. One of the participants at Tuesday's meeting

shared how the web based world our youth live in is filled with the most horrible, violent, racist, sexist and homophobic statements and jokes – how we would be sickened by what our youth live with every day. It is a place where participants strive to say the most outrageous and shocking things, only then to try to surpass what they have just said. This virtual world where many of our youth live is a nexus of sites dedicated to Holocaust jokes, and extreme pornography, of anti-#meToo comic routines, and laughter about school shootings.

It was the opinion of the young woman who shared this insight that the racist comments that we have been discussing throughout our town over the past couple of weeks are not an aberration, but rather the reflection of what our children are experiencing day in and day out as they meet and mingle on the Internet. She said that although the post that has caused so much discussion was racist, it could have just as easily been anti-semitic, or homophobic, or sexist because that is the material that our children literally have at their fingertips. It is the water they swim in; it is what their lives are flooded by.

After the young woman from KCS told us about this world she and her friends live in, a young man from VT, who had not grown up here in Keene Valley echoed everything we had just been told. In a different state, in a different age group, this young man described how he and his friends lived in the same virtual world as the one just described.

The experience of our youth at KCS is not the exception. For some kids all across our nation, it is the rule.

And then someone asked about why our children would choose to mimic what they see on the Internet. Why would they want to use racist and sexist and anti-Semitic language and jokes, especially if they wouldn't consider themselves as being bigoted, or sexist or homophobic themselves?

And here is the answer that was given. Because if we can't laugh about all of these things, what would we do? We have no coping mechanisms for school shootings, all we have is laughter. We don't know what to do with all of the hatred and violence we are surrounded by, we only have outrageous and shocking laughter.

I have been haunted by these statements since they were shared.

They give a picture of our youth inheriting a world of ultra violence and hatred. They give us an image of how we as adults have gifted our children a world of brokenness, and alienation, without also providing healthy and right tools to navigate through it. They give us an icon of a world in which our children feel unanchored and can only meet what they live through with strained laughter and a gallows humor.

And when I read the story we heard from Numbers this morning I saw a world that looks very much like the one described by our youth in last Tuesday's meeting.

Have many of our children not been raised in a world in which they are surrounded by serpents? Don't they live under a very real threat that they will be bitten some day by the bullets of a school shooting? Don't they have to constantly watch their steps so that they avoid the fangs of the opioid addiction crisis, or the venom of violence? Haven't the youth of our community confessed to us that they have no saving staff, no image of the serpents that bind them and threaten them, to look up to? And perhaps they don't feel like God has abandoned them, but don't some of our youth feel that we, their parents and their teachers, have left them to this world to figure it out by themselves?

Yet as heart wrenching and eye-opening as the stories that the young people who attended last Tuesday's meeting were, I feel that they didn't deny hope for our youth, and for ourselves, and for our community. But I do think they reinforced just how much work there is to do.

In this morning's story there is this paradoxical idea shared in which the image of that which is deadly becomes the very path towards salvation. An image of the snakes that are biting and killing the Israelites is raised up on a staff and becomes the object of communal contemplation and discussion. It's only when this happens that the Israelites become inoculated against the venom of the snakes, which are continuously biting them.

I feel a hope in the discussions that SURJ is leading, I feel hope in the school presentations that students will soon be sharing about racism in our school and community, I feel a hope in the ways we are talking about racism in our town as we meet each other in the grocery store and at the library, I feel a hope because I have talked to people I have never spoken to before and shared how I am feeling and listening to how they are feeling about what has happened in our town.

I feel hopeful because we have taken something so deadly – we have taken racism, but also the hopelessness and gallows humor of our youth – and made them the object of our own public contemplation and discussion. We are creating an image of that which threatens us as a people and raising it for all to see, and all to witness, and all to engage, and all to discuss and argue over, and all to act upon.

But our story tells us that the raising of the image of the serpent is not a magic cure. It didn't do away with the snakes. It simply made their venom no longer lethal. The serpents keep biting, and the Israelites keep having to look at the image of that which threatens them. They have to keep contemplating, and keep discussing and keep engaging or else they will fall back and die.

Same with us. Over the past couple of weeks as I've discussed racism and the challenges of our youth with people all around our community I keep hearing a skeptical refrain. I keep hearing people question whether we as individuals, and as a town, will have the commitment to these issues challenging us to really make a difference, to really affect change. I ask this of myself.

That is the challenge for us today, just as it was for that refugee people who found themselves lost in the desert millennia ago. According to our story, the only way we will survive the venom of racism and sexism, of homophobia and anti-Semitism, of abandonment and fear and hopelessness is to work – is to commit to doing the work of looking deep into ourselves and our community and work for a transformation of our hearts and our values – is to commit to raising what we find buried within ourselves and our community and raising it up in public for us to contemplate, and discuss, and argue over, and act upon. For some salvation is a goal, and an end state. But our story suggests, and our lives teach us, that any salvation we may experience in this life is the product of ongoing and committed work. It is the work of a lifetime, and it is our gift to our children.

I talked about hope, and something that also gives me hope is that not only have I heard our neighbors express their skepticism that anything will actually change, those I have spoken to at the Tuesday night meetings keep expressing their gratitude. Many have said how thankful they are that our town is having this discussion. Many have said how grateful they are to our children for being so honest, and sharing their experiences and challenges. Many have said that they are grateful for being able to share their thoughts and concerns in public.

And in this gratitude maybe we have gone back to the beginning of our story, because the snakes, and the biting, and the staff all start because the people have lost their sense of gratitude. Instead of being able to see the blessings of their lives, and remember their liberation from slavery, and the food that God sent them every day, they had fallen into a pattern of complaining about the hardships of their lives, and the discomfort of their journey. But as they were bitten and as they looked on that image of the serpent held up high and were saved from death I imagine that they began to remember gratitude. I imagine they remembered how precious their lives were, and how precious the lives of those they loved were.

It is my prayer here this morning that as we struggle as a community, and as individuals, to come to terms with what has been revealed to us, and as we continue to imagine how we can meet the challenges of racism, and the disconnection of our youth, we will do this work with a sense of gratitude for all that we have, all that we love, and all that is worth saving in our town and in our families. And I pray that we will be able to see God's presence in all of it. Because our struggle is not the sign of God's absence, but the very site of her presence. And we can be grateful for that too.

AMEN.