

Sermon, September 13, 2020

"Confluence"

First Sunday of Creation Season, Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Wilton Maine

Confluence: Merriam Webster defines the original meaning of confluence as the place where two or more rivers or streams come together but has now expanded to anything that flows together, meets, or gathers at one point. You can say every morning at 9:30 here at St. Luke's church we have a confluence. We all live our separate lives during the week in Wilton, Farmington, Jay, etc., most of us not seeing each other during the week, some of us not seeing anybody, and then "boom" because our crazy phones or our watch brings up a certain time, like magic we all appear together in a great confluence.

There is also a confluence today in the gospel we have been given by the Revised Common Lectionary, a discourse by Jesus on the need for and frequency of forgiveness, with the reflections on creation that our liturgy, readings and hymns ask us to reflect on, with finally the third item which is the 25th anniversary of what we call "Nine-Eleven" - three numbers, a single date which has been forever ensconced into most of our personal memories and histories as well as that of our nation. Perhaps you have read or watched the multiple reflections on that day which this anniversary seems to spark every year but moreso on a 25th anniversary.

So let's deal with the first confluence, that of Nine-Eleven and forgiveness. I heard an amazing statistic the other day. In March 2002—six months after the attacks—a Pew Research Center study showed that 25% of Americans believed Islam was more likely than other religions to encourage violence. During this time, political messaging (such as President George W. Bush publicly declaring "Islam is peace") initially attempted to separate the religion from terrorism. Thank you, George. Those attitudes seem remote. Today, that same metric has drastically worsened. The percentage of Americans believing Islam is more likely to encourage violence has more than doubled, reaching 51%. That says something about our preponderance today for misinformation but more importantly about our capacity to forgive and to scapegoat others who are different. In fact author Richard Beck asserts that over the last quarter-century, Islamophobia has normalized to become the most accepted form of bigotry in the United States. He points out that while the initial intensity of the post-9/11 era occasionally seems to recede, the underlying prejudice has remained steady and un-confronted. Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber says,

"My heart may be dark, but I choose to try to act according to what I believe, not what I feel. What happened on 9/11 was not OK. That's why I need to forgive. Because I can't be bound to that kind of evil. Lest it infect the evil in my own heart and metastasize it."

Lest it infect the evil in my own heart and metastasize it. And even more graphically author Anne Lamott says, "withholding forgiveness is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die".

Let's go to another confluence – Reconciliation and our care for creation. I'm going to make a wild guess here and say that none of us here are personally responsible for environmental degradation or the current ecological and climate crisis we are in. I bet some of us do what we can for the earth. "Hey I recycle"; "I compost"; "I contribute to environmental causes and organizations" – all good things. But to quote Richard Nixon who said, "I didn't do anything wrong" when clearly he did, we do share in the responsibility for the environmental situation we are in today. Back to that confluence word – the quality of the air we breathe, the water we drink, the climates we live in are all a result of many decisions made both long ago and today. Some of those decisions were purposeful and evil knowingly ignoring the polluting effects of some action while others may have been more unconscious but they all result in our current situation described by our Creation Season guide:

Because of the relentless burning of fossil fuels and deforestation, the world's climate has become disrupted and unstable. The web of life is unraveling before our eyes. Human society is at risk of collapse within decades along with mass extinctions of species and forced migrations.

- *Over the last fifty years, 60% of the planet's mammals, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and fish have been wiped out by human land development and habitat destruction.*
- *More than 1 million species are on the way to extinction.*
- *Oceans are acidifying and warming, and living fish are being displaced with dead plastic. Sea levels are rising, coral reefs dying, and ecosystems collapsing.*
- *Record-breaking and intensifying weather patterns are increasing deadly droughts, floods, storms, and heat.*
- *Food supply disruption due to weather events, water shortages, and unpredictable seasons will increase, leading to mass starvation events.*

And how much as a world society are we addressing this? We are currently in the midst of an election season. To say we are bombarded by election material is too light a word. In our mailboxes, on our radios and TV, on every website we look at. And I hate the ads even of candidates I generally agree with and will vote for because it is all so small-minded and unforgiving. He said this. She did that – most of it misrepresented. How

sad. And how much discussion is there of one of the most serious issues facing us – our current climate crisis? It is all so short-sighted. Yes the price of groceries and gas is high but there is something more critical facing us. That's why I included the story of the tree in the readings. Can we look 70 years ahead at the world we are leaving to our children. To August and Eleanor?

So the Church has stepped into this vacuum. And yes there are other brave and forward-looking people and organizations making us aware but the urgency of the climate and ecological crisis calls for a bold, prophetic response. In the gospel today, Jesus spoke of the need for unlimited forgiveness of each other from the heart. Often we have only thought of that on the personal level. But as we heard in the reading from Rev. Dr. Victoria Marie, we seek reconciliation with all life. We are at a point of confluence. We cannot ignore the land, the air, the water, the creatures. We are inexplicably bound together. Nor can we forget our brothers and sisters we know, nor whole religions of the world such as our Islamic brothers and sisters. Motivated by gospel faith and love, we continue to work to make reconciliation a generally accepted reality.