January 26, 2020 • Youth/Scout Sunday • Faith in Action

“Youth Sunday Sermons”
Sermon by Emily Payne, Jack McHugh, and Adam Guerrero

Philippians 4:4-9
Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Emily Payne
Good morning. For those who do not know me, my name is Emily. I have been a part of First United Methodist Church my entire life; my parents, both sets of grandparents, and great grandparents are members of this church family. My parents participated in youth group as teenagers and became youth counselors in their twenties. My cousins and I participated in youth throughout middle school and high school. My aunt was youth director for many years and one of my cousins was a counselor when I was high school. My family and I are very rooted, deeply rooted, within this church and community.

I participated in youth group most Sundays and summer activities like going to the beach, amusement parks and on the Youth Service Project trips. I have many memories of Fisherfolk on Sunday mornings, overnights, playing basketball in Simkins Hall, and broom hockey at the Culver City Ice Rink. I remember playing handbells and singing in the youth choir. And I remember participating in Youth Sunday.

I made lots of friendships; some of those friends were in my life for just my middle school and high school years, some I see around the holidays and a few of those friends, I’m still very close with today. Each connection has meant something to me and I feel that I am a better friend and person for having had those friendships.

As a kid, I liked being outside and playing with flowers. This naturally led to being in the backyard with my parents as they gardened. As a teenager, it became a chore. As an adult, it has become a love and an activity that I look forward to doing and sharing with family and friends.

Two years ago, I received an email notification that after five years of waiting, I was at the top of the list for a community garden plot. Since then, I’ve grown carrots, lettuce, beets, parsnips, fennel, tomatoes, cucumbers, watermelons, cantaloupes, strawberries, artichokes, potatoes, green beans and fava beans. And of course, more weeds than any other produce. My garden is one of my happy places. Potatoes was the first vegetable I planted, and they flourished like crazy. I had about 100 potatoes ripen over the same two-month period. About eight months after I dug out the last of the potatoes, I saw a green stem popping out of the dirt. It slowly grew and it turned out, I had missed a few potatoes deep underground. They laid dormant for several months and then began to grow their own roots and produce more potatoes. New roots were growing out of the old roots. I feel my time participating in our church’s youth group ministry is a giant maze of roots – roots from my family and from many of your own families.

I’ve learned a lot about gardening in the last few years. There is a practice called Companion Planting. This is when you plant specific plants, whether it’s a produce or a flower, next to or near, other specific plants. This is to help them grow. Some plants, like tomatoes, will produce flowers, but will not produce fruit unless the flowers are pollinated. So planting roses, basil, and thyme which attract bees, who will then pollinate the tomato flowers, is a smart idea. There are other plants, such as carrots, eggplant, and asparagus that help tomatoes grow: they provide a different nutrient support for the tomato plant.

One person has said “Companion planting is the growing together of all those elements and beings that encourage life and growth.” UMYF is like companion planting. There are elements to each that have to come together in order to produce or provide growth. You have the church, aka the garden, the environment. You have the bible and Jesus’ teaching, aka the soil. You have the counselors, aka the plant food and water. And you have the youth, aka the seedlings. Each component and element of a garden is necessary to make it grow. Each person and every interaction is needed to grow our youth ministry and to anchor each individual root. Providing a strong foundation in a being’s life can mean everything; it can give them a chance to explore and grow, to produce, to flourish and to provide.

I believe that each youth counselor provides different structure and nutrients within the youth program. I am like a stake that you position next to a smaller plant or tree to help it resist wind and supply support while it matures until it is able to
grown on its own. I like to think that I provide guidance and support each Sunday evening. You know I’m going to be there when you need a little extra support as you grow and expand your roots and leaves.

Like gardening and working with youth, you don’t immediately see the fruits of your labor. You plant a seed and watch it grow; you provide it with water and food, and love and sometimes even talk to them. Being a youth counselor means being present, showing support, guidance and care. Sometimes you talk, other times you listen. On Sunday evenings, before dinner, I am typically sitting on one of the couches in the youth lounge having a conversation with a youth. Some conversations are quick check-ins like “how was your week?” and some are longer. Each one is different but each one brings a smile.

I’m sure that former youth counselors sitting in the pews this morning will agree with me: As a counselor, you hope every youth feels at home. You hope they know and feel accepted and are encouraged to grow. UMYF provided me with that environment 15 years ago and I have wanted to help provide that for others ever since. My wish to these youth is that they feel at home here; and no matter if their roots are deep underground or just on the surface, that they know their presence each week helps to grow and support each other; and their presence even helps the counselors to grow.

Thank you.

Jack McHugh

May the Lord bless you and keep you.
May the Lord make his face to shine upon you,
And be gracious unto you.
May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you,
And give you peace.

Good morning. Thank you for allowing me to share our Youth Benediction that we’ll read again at the closing of this morning’s service, but I hope for a few minutes to hold this in our thoughts. For those of you whom I have not had the pleasure of meeting yet, my name is Jack McHugh. I’ve been a Youth counselor for nearly four years now, and you may also have seen me behind the piano at simple church Sunday evenings. Though I’ve been a part of this community for a few years now, it seems only appropriate to address that I am one of the few counselors who did not attend this church growing up, participate in the Youth ministry or have my parents as Youth counselors at First UMC.

The simple, but unfortunate truth, is that I grew up in New Jersey. We didn’t have a benediction like the one we’ll share together later, but we did have a Youth group. We called it CCD, which until writing this morning’s address, I never knew stood for the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine. Just saying that makes me squirm, even without remembering the two hour lectures every other Tuesday from 1st-8th grade hosted by a snarly woman who barked out page numbers from our hardcover textbook and would publicly chastise you if you interrupted her reading with as much as a bathroom request. I remember seeing friends in school the next day, shell-shocked, and would exchange knowing glances that seemed to say, “I’m glad you survived too,” or, “At least it’s only two more years.”

Things got a bit better in high school: the two-hundred-person lecture was divided into twenty-person confirmation preparation classes, meeting every week for two years reviewing our sacraments and writing papers on various religious topics. I can almost hear every Youth behind me thinking, “At least Tricia doesn’t make us do THAT.” But there were highlights: meetings were held in the homes of parishioners, food was served before each week, and there was a particularly moving retreat held a few months before confirmation that many of my peers described as, “the only reason I got through.” But many didn’t. I had a number of friends drop out before confirmation, tired of the lectures, bored by the church, and disconnected from their peers. And for those of us who did make it, we were dropped- cut off after receiving our confirmation the Fall of our junior year with no group or social structure to retain us. I can’t say I’ve seen any of my confirmation group since that November.

My motivation for sharing this is not to invoke a sense of pity, but to contrast the culture here at First UMC. This is a group about fun, about playing games, making noise and being messy. These are kids who get to explore, from our Sanctuary, to 3rd Street Promenade and even our doubts and anxieties. This is an organization built on service, from our care baskets, Cakes for a Cause and annual summer service project. But more than that, this is a community and this is special. You have welcomed me in as you welcome each other, with grace and kindness built on inclusivity. This group finds new ways to grow, to laugh and to challenge each other with the hard questions that makes it so easy to walk away like so many of my peers did at your age.

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I'm grateful to you all for how you've allowed me to grow with you these past few years. In preparation of this morning, I searched for a single example to quantify that growth, and came back with a dozen. You've reminded me to laugh, how to be mindful, to give, to serve amongst a number of other virtues, and to slow down every now and then toss a Playskool doll into a garbage can.

But most importantly, you ask great questions. Whether being inquisitive during Sunday evenings at the dinner table, during group discussions or overlooking the Smith River near the Oregon border, I've learned from the questions you've asked me, and I hope my answers have helped you grow as well. Your journey through faith evolves as you continue to ask and learn from those around you, and stops when you cease to. Surround yourselves by people who you can ask those hard questions; who you trust, you value and will push you to find and be the best version of yourself. I surround myself with all of you, to be among people I trust and value, and know you will continue to ask hard questions for us to find the best version of ourselves.

While I want to continue to address the congregation at large, my next comments are intended for the Youth behind me. This group you are a part of is special, it is unique, and it's exactly those things because of who each of you are as an individual, and how you choose to support each other week in and week out. Come each week as yourself, and be grateful for every opportunity you have to share your unique gifts. Be present, be mindful, and recognize the joy afforded to you each week by your peers, counselors and parents. And at the end of each week, think of the promise you make to each other right before you leave, which I’ll ask of you again now. May you bless and keep one another. May you shine your face and be gracious unto each other. May you lift up your countenance upon one another and give each other peace.

Thank you.

Adam Guerrero

Good morning Santa Monica first! My name is Adam Guerrero.

Every year I watch youth talk from this pulpit and reflect on the last 7 years of their life. Themes range from their life at school, at home, in this church and youth group. The counselors usually meet with the seniors before Youth Sunday to help them with the writing process, get them thinking about big moments in their life, things that helped shape who they are now. It’s really amazing to watch them on Youth Sunday, not just because most youth have a profound fear of public speaking, but because they get to share their experiences and faith with a community that has watched them grow up. This year, we don’t have any active high school seniors. So... you get us, the youth counselors!

Each and every year, as I hug the seniors outside the church at the end of worship, I can’t help but see the years flash by. During the seven years between those moments, youth walk the road from childhood to adulthood. The road leads them to their first experiences of identity and heartbreak, fear and isolation, but also connections and relationships, all while beginning to explore big life-questions and how they fit into this world.

As adults, our own journeys have often become well-worn in facing the challenges of life: failure, disappointment, heartbreak. We’ve learned coping strategies and we’ve settled into patterns. But youth meet these challenges truly for the first time during their years in the youth group. It can be a disorienting and confusing time as they figure out how to live and move in this life.

One writer defines youth based not on age, but on the experience of learning life for the first time.

As brains develop, we move from concrete ways of seeing and understanding the world to a more expanded and abstract view. As youth, they are in between these two ways of seeing. The world can still look very concrete, black or white. They wonder whether they need to choose between Science OR Religion, being Christian OR Queer. We work with youth to explore the grey areas. Our hope is that they trust us enough to ask those first hard questions so we can walk alongside them to listen and support. We try to challenge the OR - Can you believe in science AND Religion - can you be a Christian AND Queer?

As youth counselors, we also try to create a safe space for them to just be themselves, where they can take a breath from the demands of what it means to be a teenager today. It’s a space for them to practice vulnerability when they are feeling alone or misunderstood. It’s a space where they can name pain, such as being betrayed or left out. And this is a place where it’s safe to ask “why?” when a loved one has passed away or when bad things happen to good people.

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In my role, I sometimes feel like a bridge. One side holds my memories and experiences of being a teenager and growing up, the good things and the challenging things. The other side holds who I am as an adult, what I’ve learned and how I understand and see the world now. It’s hanging out on the bridge, in the in-between of these two places in life, that allows me to connect with the youth.

I’m able to relate to our youth, to understand those Tik-Tok videos or what filter is trending on Instagram (its the head pop-ups if you were wondering) - but I’m also able to be a friend, a mentor, a confidant, someone who has been where they are and who can offer a perspective beyond what they see right now.

One thing I’ve learned and realized as a youth counselor is that while we provide a lot for the youth, they provide a lot for us too. We as the church need these younger generations. The youth and young adults push us and demand for us, as The Church, to be authentic, vulnerable, and intentional. The Church needs them in order to be a community of faith that is courageously relevant in our world.

As I prepared for today’s message, I reflected on how I came to this place. I’ve been going to this church all my life. My parents were married here, my siblings and I were all baptized here, I attended Sunday school and youth group.

Then in the summer of 2003 while I was in college, after no luck finding internships in engineering (my major), I found myself back here at church, as a summer camp counselor for Summer Adventures. Those experiences of building relationships with the children and youth, preparing programs, going on field trips, creating musical productions gave me a foundation in working with children and youth. When summer was over, Char Smith, the youth and children’s director at the time, invited me back to UMYF, this time as a middle school counselor. I’ve been doing this for 15 years now and really feel a calling to work with this unique age group.

I think about my youth counselors when I was in youth group, and the impact they had on me. I feel a responsibility to continue being a part of what creates UMYF. It’s about sharing a meal together, being silly and vulnerable with each other, exploring questions with youth about what it means to be a Christian in 2020.

If we go with the definition of youth that I read earlier - that it is based not on age, but on the experience of learning life - then my hope is for all of us to walk with our youth and each learn new ways of living life together, to be bridges in this community, between generations, between those outside these walls and inside of them - and even out in our world.

Thank you.