

Looking Up

2019, Pleasantville Presbyterian Church Associate Katelyn Westervelt

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In this sermon, Pleasantville Presbyterian Church Associate Katelyn Westervelt shares an impassioned challenge to the church's confirmands (and all the rest of us) to try to bring a little more grace into the world. "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." --Luke 6:27
(Originally Preached on Sunday, June 9, 2019 at Pleasantville Presbyterian Church)

Scripture: Acts 1:1-11

A reading from Luke 6, verses 27-31;

“But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Please pray with me.

Dear God,

May the words of my mouth and the listening ears of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O God our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen

Sermon: "Looking Up"

The last couple of months have been a really painful time not just in Pleasantville, not even just in the United States, but in the whole world. I've had really sad and angry days because of how humans are treating other humans. I've had moments that I've lost my patience and have raised my voice at others expressing their opinions. I've had moments of not being kind to others, not being Christ-like. But the poem I have started to repeat to myself at least once a day that has helped me calm down and remember to recenter my emotions is this: It takes grace to remain kind in cruel situations.

Back in April, a few of us had the pleasure of going to Camp Johnsonburg for the ultimate youth day with the confirmation class. It was not only a time of absolute fun and bonding, but a time of reflection and remembering what fuels us to be closer to God. We talked a lot about what brings us closer to God in each of our lives, and that had a huge impact on me, because all eight of these kids being confirmed have taught me so much. They've taught me to be youthful in my faith. To be curious and always ask questions. To have faith in the world. To always be willing to help others, even if it means your plan gets set back. And most importantly, to love without barriers. I've seen them accept each other and bond over music, movies, and a general love of bugging me. They come from five different school districts, and have shown that despite not knowing one another, they are able to connect and talk and have fun.

Today is also Pentecost, and honestly I did not totally know what that was in relation to the Bible until recently. In Acts 2, we are reminded of the beauty and lessons that Pentecost is about. It's a time that we recognize and remember that the Holy Spirit is the representation of God being with us. It's a hope that God is with

us even still today. President Jimmy Carter told us that “We should live our lives as though Christ was coming this afternoon”. God has never left your side. God has never lead you astray. God has never let you fall down without getting back up again. God has never let you take two steps backward and none forward. And I don’t know about y’all, but that’s the exact meaning of unconditional love to me.

I have a lot of things to say. And I have a lot of thoughts to share. But while writing this sermon, I wanted to make sure that the things I wanted to say and the thoughts I wanted to share were going to make an impact on the confirmands, because today is about them focusing on God and their relationship with the Lord and the church. And it’s also about how we are all children of God. How we are all still figuring out where the Spirit works in our lives, and where we see Him at work on a daily basis. Two weeks ago I was in a car accident that made me learn and reflect on a lot of difficult lessons. I kept replaying that moment in my head over and over again and each time all I could say after it was over was “Alright God. Clearly there’s more things I’m meant to do on this earth, because you just saved me for another time. So what do I need to learn and do?”. I took a few days to just be quiet and keep to myself to figure out what I needed to get from this. So, as I do, I wrote it all down. The most prevalent lessons I got were these: Tell those who matter to you that you love them every chance you get. Be kind to everyone that surrounds you. Support those who support you. Remember to thank those who have helped you grow. Do not make decisions out of anger. Do something you love every single day. Say yes to the things that make you seek discomfort. Live life fully and live it with abundant love. And overall, just be grateful for every minute you have on this earth.

If you have even had a few conversations with me, it quickly becomes obvious of two things I am very passionate about in life. One of them being dogs... and the other being music. Hannah and Skyler witness these things on a daily basis, in particular music. It's a rare occasion that music isn't blasting through speakers in our kitchen on Sunday afternoons, or that I'm not in my room just jamming out by myself. So when I decided to write this sermon, I made a playlist that was full of songs that inspired me. The lyric that got me thrown into this idea of love in the world was one that says "love is the best thing that has ever happened to this world. When has love ever been a waste of time?". But there's this one song that the kids in senior high youth group have heard me talk about... it's called Soapbox by Kid Quill. I honestly could share the whole song with you because every lyric has an impact on me, but to name a few, he digs into the idea of the importance of loving one another and challenges the listeners to think about how they would respond. He sings, "When push comes to shove, would you turn your shoulder or would you learn to love?" "Love a little harder. Do someone a favor." "If the world started burning would we put it out together, or would we still fight with one another?". What Jesus teaches us, and what we hear in Luke 6, is that we need to accept and love all others, even our enemies. We must help those in need, and pray for those who are not kind to us.

Whenever Debbie is giving her sermons, I tend to always write stuff down that comes to mind on the bulletin to be able to go back to later and think about more. A few of the things I've written down that have been inspired by her go as followed:

You have got to be passionate to change the world.

As long as you have the manual ability to speak, I want you to talk. Talk for those who can't. For those whose voices are oppressed. For those who are scared in this world.

And that

Change is one of the most exhilarating and necessary experiences humans go through.

We have this incredible ability to learn so much from each other because of our circumstances. And to love one another. And to grow in our faith together. We, the people sitting in this church on 400 Bedford Road, are in a place that allows us to freely discuss our faith and our opinions on topics ranging all over the place. We have the space to have adult education, to have confirmation, to hold community events to bring people together instead of apart. We are a congregation that accepts everyone where they are. Where they are theologically, where they are mentally, where they are physically. We meet them where they are because that's what God teaches us to do. We have the ability to teach people what it means to learn about Jesus and the Bible no matter their circumstance. There are countless stories of people learning about who God is through coming to this church and being welcomed here. We are a group of people who should be more vocal about welcoming all here, because more than not, people do not have a place to be themselves in this world. We all have something that has the potential to get criticized by others in the world. So why aren't we welcoming more and more people everywhere we go?

Congregation, I'll be really honest... it's mind blowing that I'm standing up here right now preaching. If you were to ask Hannah, Skyler, Debbie, Jane, or many others who they would least expect to get up here semi voluntarily to preach, they would have said me. This isn't something I'm really comfortable with. It's not

something that I look for opportunities to do. It's so far out of my comfort zone, and it's not something I was planning on saying "yes" to. But then a lot of change suddenly occurred in my life back in February. It was all change that was needed, but it wasn't expected by any means. I thoroughly believe in practicing what you preach, and as some of you have heard me quote before, and will continue to hear me quote, Shane Claiborne said that "If we lose a generation of young people in the church, it won't be because we didn't entertain them. It will be because we didn't dare them to do something meaningful with the Gospel in light of the world we live in". And to circle back to practicing what you preach, that is why I am up here. I can't tell these kids to do something if I can't either. So, confirmands, this is me daring you to do something meaningful. To keep living into the spirit of this church, to meet people where they are, and to love others no matter the circumstance with open hearts and open minds, because the world could use a lot more love right now. It just takes grace.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.