

Pentecost All Saints C
Peace, Seattle
November 6, 2016
Ephesians 1:11-23, Luke 6:20-31

FLEDGING

In Week 1 of our 3-week focus on our lives as stewards, we spoke of our congregation as a community where faith is formed; a NEST in which faith comes to birth and is fed so that each one of us—whatever our age—can be provided with what we need to move toward spiritual maturity, to grow wings, and finally to soar.

Today we're in phase 2—expanding our vision and becoming FLEDGLINGS with wings.

To be a fledgling, a bird's feathers and wing muscles must be sufficiently developed for it to fly. It takes baby robins about two weeks to reach that marker. And it was during one of those two week intervals that a baby bird I came to call "Stretch" dropped into my life.

It was summer at Holden Village and I was working in my office as Village Registrar when some children came in with a scrawny, featherless baby bird, which had fallen from its nest.

It was so small and vulnerable in their little hands, and irresistibly cute, of course, that immediately I started to bond with the little creature. Our search for the bird's nest came up emptyhanded, so we decided it was up to us to do our best to care for it.

A cardboard box was acquired and grass added to make it as nest-like as possible. But what would we feed it? As word got around about the bird, a volunteer who worked in the woodlot pledged to bring fresh maggots to me each day, and so my unlikely role as surrogate parent began.

Every day as I went to work, I brought the bird with me in the box. And every night I carried it home again. I wasn't exactly sure what I was doing, but the daily diet of wood worms seemed to agree quite well with our little friend, and as long as this was the case, we were happy.

Soon after I began caring for the young robin, I saw him working to stretch his growing wings, and I took to calling him STRETCH. The name stuck.

About a week after Stretch became part of our Village flock, he became a fledgling and began making short flights from one corner of the registration office to the other. This complicated things.

He was entering a new phase, and expecting him to remain quietly in his cardboard box was not going to work. **On top of that, now that he was growing up, a deeper challenge presented itself. How would he learn to find food for himself?**

On the one hand, he presumably had instincts to guide him in that regard, but on the other hand, it was becoming clear that instinct alone would not guarantee his survival in this wilderness setting.

Now fully fledged, Stretch was ready to make his way in the world—only he didn't have the right kind of modeling to make that transition successfully.

Instead of hanging out in the Registration office, he'd grown accustomed to hanging out on the balcony of our chalet, and when he spied me coming up the path toward home, he'd glide down, land at my feet, and look up at me expecting a handout.

Short of getting down on my hands and knees and poking my nose at the ground looking for worms, I had no idea how Stretch was going to learn to get food on his own. I tried a few heart-to-hearts with him—you know, Father-Son chats—but to no avail.

Finally, one day, he flew off and didn't return. I like to think that he fell in with a good peer group of robins, and learned from them the ways of being a bird. But I'll never know.

Being a fledgling is a vulnerable place to be in the world. Whether you're a being of the avian variety or a being of the human variety, getting connected to a community that can provide safety, nurture, guidance, and modeling is essential. That's something we each try to do in our own households, and it's what we strive to do here at Peace.

When a baby is born, the range at which it can focus its sight is roughly equal to the distance between the mother's eyes and the infant's eyes as it's nestled at her breast. As babies mature, that focal distance moves outward to take in more of the world. (You can see this happening among our little ones here at Peace!)

Their range of vision gradually expands and before long they start recognizing that they are not only connected to their moms and dads, but are part of a community—a flock. **TOGETHER, YOU AND I—ALL OF US — ARE STEWARDS OF THIS PROCESS.**

Watching the children of our congregation grow and mature is one of the great perks of congregational life! And as Graham pointed out, it's not only the kids who are in the process of formation—we all are.

Sunday School, retreats, making meals and having fun together, service projects, Confirmation, adult ed—these are all critical parts of the process. And so too is the spiritual formation that happens at home when we come together to share highs and lows, talk about scripture, praying together, bless each other. The FAITH FIVE.

On All Saints Sunday, we remember and lift up those people dear to us, dear to this congregation, and dear to the ages who have taught us something about this journey, who've shared their lives with us in the body of Christ, who've shown us both what it means to struggle and what it means to receive the grace of God as gift and blessing.

We learn so much from each other. We have so much to share; to pass on; to teach. It's a main reason the Spirit has called us together into this community.

For the truth is, to be a citizen of today's world, especially a young person, is to be vulnerable. A new study just out last week confirms this truth in the harshest way imaginable: The number of teen deaths by suicide in America is now greater than the number of teen deaths from car crashes.¹

Writer David Brooks, in a recent column, told how one family is helping to buck that trend by inviting vulnerable young people into their lives through a simple yet profound practice.²

Brooks writes:

Kathy and David have a son named Santi, who went to Washington, D.C., public schools.

Santi had a friend who sometimes went to school hungry. So Santi invited him to occasionally eat and sleep at his house.

¹ See article in Nov 3, 2016 issue of *The Seattle Times*. <http://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/more-young-adolescents-died-from-suicide-than-car-crashes-in-2014/>

² *Second helpings and second chances: glimmer of hope for struggling kids*. Originally published October 18, 2016. Emphasis is mine. You can find the full article at <http://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/second-helpings-and-second-chances-glimmer-of-hope-for-struggling-kids/> © 2016, New York Times.

That friend had a friend, and that friend had a friend, and now when you go to dinner at Kathy and David's house on Thursday night there might be 15 to 20 teenagers crammed around the table, and later there will be groups of them crashing in the basement or in the few small bedrooms upstairs.

The kids who show up at Kathy and David's have endured the ordeals of modern poverty: homelessness, hunger, abuse, sexual assault. Almost all have seen death firsthand — of a sibling, friend or parent...One 21-year-old woman came to dinner last week and said this was the first time she'd been around a family table since she was 11.

Yet by some miracle, hostile soil has produced charismatic flowers. Thursday dinner is the big social occasion of the week. Kids come from around the city. Spicy chicken and black rice are served. Cellphones are banned ("Be in the now," Kathy says). The kids call Kathy and David "Momma" and "Dad," are unfailingly polite, clear the dishes, turn toward one another's love like plants toward the sun and burst with big glowing personalities...

I started going to dinner there about two years ago, hungry for something beyond food.

- Each meal we go around the table, and everybody has to say something nobody else knows about them.
- Each meal we demonstrate our commitment to care for one another.
- I took my daughter once and on the way out she said, "That's the warmest place I can ever imagine."

During this election season of viciousness, vulgarity and depravity, Thursdays at Kathy and David's has been a weekly uplift, and their home is a place to be reminded of what is beautiful about our country and what we can do to bring out its loveliness...

David and Kathy have set up a charitable organization called AOK... All Our Kids, to help each of the kids come into his or her own fullness. Four started college this year, and one joined City Year, the national service organization...

Poverty up close is so much more intricate and unpredictable than the picture of poverty you get from the grand national debates. The kids can project total self-confidence one minute and then slide into utter lostness the next...There's no margin for error for these kids...

The adults in this community give the kids the chance to present their gifts. At my first dinner, Edd read a poem from his cracked flip phone that I first thought was from Langston Hughes, but it turned out to be his own. Kesari has a voice that somehow emerged from New Orleans jazz from the 1920s. Madeline and Thalya practice friendship as if it were the highest art form. Jamel loses self-consciousness when he talks of engine repair.

They give us a gift — complete intolerance of social distance. When I first met Edd, I held out my hand to shake his. He looked at it and said, "We hug here," and we've been hugging and hanging off each other since...

"I still haven't seen one program change one kid's life," Bill Milliken, a veteran youth activist told me. "What changes people is relationships. Somebody willing to walk through the shadow of the valley of adolescence with them." Souls are not saved in bundles. Love is the necessary force.

Throughout this ugly year, AOK has been my visit to a better future, more powerful than any political tract about what we need next. (David Brooks)

After his historic meeting with Lutheran leaders in Sweden last week to mark the Reformation, Pope Francis proposed six new contemporary Beatitudes to set alongside those Jesus gives us in today's gospel.

In light of David Brooks' story, one in particular hits home:

"Blessed are those who look into the eyes of the abandoned and marginalized, and show them their closeness."³

Sisters and Brothers, sinners and saints, fledglings all—we are called to be a community that is completely intolerant of social distance.

It's what Jesus taught and lived. It's the dream the dearest saints sought to emulate. It's the very protocol and rules of hospitality we recognize and practice each week when we celebrate the sacred Meal we call HOLY COMMUNION! It's what we all need to experience in our souls.

Complete intolerance of social distance.

And here's the deal: we get to do this together!

And no matter what happens this Tuesday, no matter who we elect or what initiatives pass or fail, this will still be our calling come Wednesday morning.

We are the ones God has called to steward the gifts that have been placed in our hands—forming faith, cultivating hope, practicing love.

This is God's dream, and it's become our dream! From nesting to fledging to soaring.

Amen.

³ <http://www.wsj.com/articles/popes-beatitudes-highlight-care-for-environment-and-outsiders-1477998680>