

Confirmation Sunday
20 May 2018

Rev. Nancy Lincoln Reynolds

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

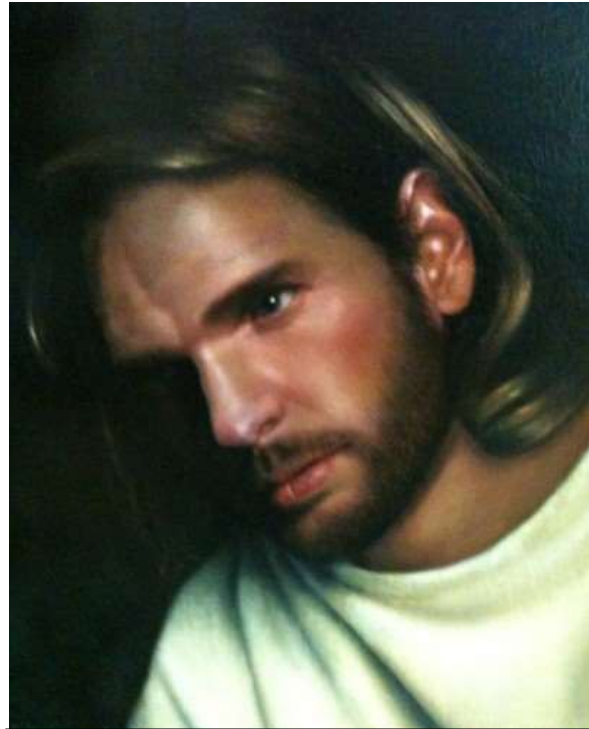
John 15: 26-27; 4b-15

What DID Jesus Do?

As you know, I am just back from a three-month academic sabbatical designed to consider the importance of “resilience” for all of us, but especially for our youth here in this community and county. Resilience is defined as an aspect of character or personality that deals with inevitable adversity/difficulties in life; the ability to bounce back rather than give up when faced with those pieces of life that are painful, disappointing and even traumatizing, or, in the extreme, matters of survival. You may recall that the research done by Dr. Mueller at the University of Chicago in response to our community’s having one of the higher rates of self-harm and suicide in the nation, named a *lack* of resilience and help-seeking behaviors as the primary focus for changing the patterns here. And, as an aside, I think this county and organizations like Parenting for a Different World initiated here at Woods, have made huge strides in the direction of change. Both as a pastor and as a psychotherapist, I chose to take a close look at resilience through the eyes of those who themselves endured, or those who had family who endured, and bounced back from the extreme versions of adversity through communist and Russian occupation and oppression beginning in the 1940’s. It was/is my hope to be able to pass on learnings from them about resilience to our community, especially to those of our youth who experience a different kind of stress, but stress and adversity nonetheless. One only need consider, for example, the tragic loss in yet another school shooting in Texas on Friday wherein, purportedly, a young person who was bullied and mocked beyond tolerance chose to pick up a gun and use it rather than finding a healthy resilience. I look forward to sharing some of the things I gleaned from this time away at another opportunity.

Today, however, I want to focus mostly on the importance of what is happening today as we recognize and celebrate our Confirmands whose lives are being committed to their faith...covenanting with all of us as witnesses, to living their lives in faith. You see, faith itself is a key aspect of developing resilience and coming out on the other side of adversity.

One hundred years ago, RT Glover, Fellow of St. John’s College and Cambridge University lecturers in Ancient History, and author of *The Jesus of History*, identified *intimacy* as the real secret of Jesus’ method for turning people’s attention and focus back to God. He likely would



“Advocate” by Liz Lemon Swindle

have said that resilience was grounded in and supported by relationships...especially relationship with God through Jesus Christ by faith. "The Gospel began with friendship," writes Glover, "...old acquaintance and intimacy are at the heart of it." As both scholar and author, Glover believed that Jesus, having been steeped in Jewish tradition and raised in the religious context and called "Rabbi" by many, perhaps was never more Jewish than when he first began his ministry.... He would, at his death, as you know, be mockingly named "King of the Jews." It was Jesus' purpose to reframe his people's relationship with God in response to his belief that people were losing touch with that relationship and falling away from their faith. And he did this by way of his own relationship with them, inviting people to reconsider how they were going about their faith lives. I think it is a relevant concern in our time as well, for all of us (not just our confirmands) to be considering how healthy our lives of faith are. This is a concern right here at Woods. We need to reconsider our personal investment in the Woods Confirmation's process and Woods' outreach into this community and our mission work both locally and globally.

Jesus calls upon men and women to rethink God. And he inspires them to this new exploration of God by "the touch of his own life" as one commentator suggests; inspires them by the use of his own relationship with them. St Augustine said, "...the first thing that Jesus had to do, as a teacher, was to induce men to re-think God. Men, he saw, do not want precepts: they do not want ethics, morals or rules; what they want is to re-think God, to re-discover God, to re-explore him, to live on the basis of relationship with God."

I believe that Jesus did, in fact, give himself for humanity in the scheme of salvation, but not before he gave himself to humanity in individual friendship and relationship for the purpose of reuniting individuals with God. This sermon's title, "What DID Jesus do," suggests that Jesus went about his ministry not just by way of a message spoken, but by way of the relationships he developed and had with anyone whom he encountered, and especially with those who followed him. What DID Jesus do, and how did he do it?

Instead of getting answers on my sabbatical, I was given "windows"...into the past, present and future, all of which posed the question for me of what DID Jesus do? These windows showed me how far removed our lives here are, historically, from those who have experienced near life or death scenarios; as well as presently, when we don't have access to a history of oppression except insofar as our African American brothers and sisters are willing to share it with us. In Hungary, resilience was the response to decades of learning to live with fear and uncertainty. My mother's first cousin shared with me and Andras that the greatest fear for her was uncertainty. During the Russian occupation, the soldiers would come into their houses at will and do whatever they wanted. Sometimes they did nothing; sometimes they took anything and everything; sometimes they took just the men, saying they were going to put them to work, and they would be gone for three years, sent to Siberia... some never came back; sometimes they took the women, and sometimes they took the children. The greatest fear was the not knowing what to expect. These things were difficult for the Hungarians, but almost worse for Jews whose fates were clear. Again, a report for another time, but the point being that such adversity affects one's life profoundly and creates within them a resilience as a form of redemption. And the

primary thing that I learned was how extremely important relationships are, both in terms of survival and resilience for later.

And relationships, in the context of faith, are foundational. Jesus knew this, I think, which is why he Did what he did initially. He built friendships and established trust. He knew that, if he was to be trusted and listened to, he would need to have a relationship. He was convinced that there was a need among the people in his faith tradition and then, ultimately, others as well...there was a need for a reframe on reliance upon God. He came to “breathe new life” into their existing relationships with God. Both of our texts today speak to that “breathing life” into things whose vibrancy and vitality were fading.

Ezekiel offers us windows into this kind of lack by picturing dry bones...dry bones lying around and piled up, and he ponders whether or not they may ever live again. It is the same question raised often by people facing adversity...people who feel, for whatever reasons, like their life-giving resources have dried up and they don't know how/if they may live again. What DID Jesus do?

It is into this kind of context that our Jesus of Nazareth came. Jesus, as I said, because of his love for God's people, believed that they were in need of some new breath/some new life. He believed that there needed to be a return to God in a radical way, since the people seemed to be losing focus.

Today, this Sunday, offers us an opportunity to wonder about the Spirit's breathing new life into ourselves and, ultimately, into this community. This is Pentecost, the extraordinary time when the Holy Spirit sets fire to an otherwise dry group of individuals...individuals who were struggling with the adversity of loss and uncertainty about what would come next in their lives of faith. This Spirit breathes life into those individuals such that they create community with one another by way of understanding even those distinctly different from themselves. This is also our Confirmation Sunday and, once again, we may see the power of the Holy Spirit working within individuals so that they become and join an already existing community of believers. The Affirmation of Faith we have used today comes from them and represents this kind of power...individually written statements coming together and creating this communal statement.

What DID Jesus do? Jesus breathed life into individuals by way of their relationships with God...and formed community among them. So, to our Confirmands, please know that Confirmation is a two-step process that repeats itself over and over as you mature. First, in your own self-awareness and facing of adversity/difficulty, you must cultivate your faith and relationship with God within yourself. There you will find the life-giving and new breathing that Jesus initiated because you are a child of God, first and foremost. Secondly, following Jesus' example, you do what he did by making relationships that transcend differences and that recognize a kingdom and a rule beyond anything established by humanity of nations. Just yesterday, at the Royal wedding, that was the sermon message: if love...the love that transcends any and all nations and religions...ruled the world then *that* would be the new heaven.

Breathing life is God's initiative. Living that life, individually, and transforming it into community, is your initiative. Do what Jesus DID so that the things said about him in relation to

others might be said about you. Over and over again the Bible describes the impression Jesus gave of how he cared for people...all people: "He saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion toward them," says Matthew. Mark tells the story of the rich young ruler, and says the disciples saw an expression on Jesus' face when he looked at him, "Jesus, looking on him, loved him." Over and over Jesus lived out the life of compassion...faced adversity with a resilience that relied upon faith in God, his Father.

There is no question but that adversity and difficulty can be scarring, and you may come away wounded. But remember the words of Ezekiel, who declared God's promise, "I will put my Spirit within you and you will live." And John, likewise, reveals Jesus' promise to send the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, to sustain us in whatever comes. God did not promise an easy life, but he did promise help to live it.

All of us must strive to do what Jesus DID: look for and recognize those places where adversity still lingers and dries up your own or other's lives such that we/they are unclear about whether life will be possible again. Allow the Spirit of God to breathe new life into you and them. Offer yourself in relationship to others...regardless of differences, and share what you know to be true about God. Create community so that together we may be resilient in our support of one another. Amen.