
The Power of Community

A sermon by Joe Loughran
Ascension Sunday – Year C

It's that time of the year: warmer weather, pollen allergies, and the ending of the school year. As a graduating senior, I will be moving on to the Promised Land: the University of North Carolina.

While the future appears rosy and bright, there was another graduation in my life that appeared much less certain. When I completed the moving up ceremony, the moment that marks the transition of a child from the Lower School to Middle School at Pace Academy, the future was dark and murky in a time when things should've been promising.

We had just been informed that my brother Jordan's leukemia had returned. The news was devastating. It came with a sense of hopelessness that hadn't been there the first time cancer had reared its ugly head.

Jordan had defeated this monster once, and just when things seemed normal again, the cancer was back.

That summer we waged the most arduous battle of our lives. Our family moved to New York City to get Jordan the best treatment, and there, Jordan received a second bone marrow transplant. Needless to say, New York was a tumultuous time, and when we got back to Atlanta, uncertainty clouded the future.

In many ways our family felt like the disciples after Jesus's crucifixion, we didn't know what to think, only to hope and pray that everything would be all right.

As a young kid, I doubted whether everything would be ok. Sure, I believed God would find a way to get us through this ordeal, but a nagging part of me was uncertain—What if the worst happened? What would that do to our family?

On this Mother's Day, I give thanks to my incredible mother, who stayed strong despite the impossible circumstances, whose warm smile and loving presence always brought a sense of comfort and peace.

Now, not only was our family experiencing stress at this point, but I was also starting middle school, a time of instability and uncertainty in the life of a young adult. You remember those days don't you?

I felt disconnected from my friends, though through no fault of their own. I had been gone all summer, and didn't have access to them through social media, as we do today. (This was 2009, however, so I did have a sweet iPod Touch.)

During this time, our family attended a very nice church, but it lacked much of a youth program. However, many of our family friends attended the Cathedral and raved about the wonderful youth program.

That fall, after returning from New York, we joined to the Cathedral of St. Philip.

First, I started by going to Sunday School.

Then, I decided to walk across the street to Fellini's for a Wednesday night bible study, and then things started changing.

Led by our old youth leader Brandon Peete, the environment at Bible study was unlike anything I had ever experienced. The group, of which I was the sole middle schooler, was dynamic, insightful, and above all a family.

Our weekly diagnosis of the Bible passage *de jour* changed the way I thought about religion. We talked about the scripture as it related to us and the obstacles we faced in our adolescent lives.

I grew more and more entwined in this incredible group of people, going to other youth events such as Braves games, ski retreats, and the always-competitive diocesan kickball tournament.

Eventually I branched out to youth events outside the Cathedral, such as the incredible experience of Happening at Camp Mikell.

When Brandon left, he was replaced by the wonderful Rebecca Storace, who grew to become one of my closest friends and mentors. Even though Rebecca left last year, and even though she was tough on me sometimes, Rebecca helped me become who I am today. I don't know who I would be without her.

Participating in youth group changed my life, showing me how dynamic a common faith could be among a group of young people.

In Acts, Luke describes the ascension of Jesus and how two men in white robes appear and say, "Men of Galilee ask why are you standing and looking?"

Now who here wouldn't have been standing and looking? It isn't every day you get to watch someone ascend!

In all seriousness, the men in white want them to do something else. What should they have been doing?

Well, here is what they do next. The rest of the Book of Acts is about the disciples coming together to create a Christian community.

Jesus gives them the power of the Holy Spirit, to spread the message of the gospel and create communities grounded in the resurrection.

This is our call as Christians, and this is what I have experienced at the Cathedral. It is what brought me, and many of my friends into this community of faith.

The past few years I have made friends in this community that have become a second family; they are a group of friends who are always there for me and cared for me more than anything.

As my faith ascended in this parish, my brother's health also ascended. Each day he was stronger and stronger, and you could tell just by looking at him, that he was ascending to a new way of life.

Jordan is healthy and happy now, getting ready to complete his own moving up ceremony in a few weeks, as he heads to the sixth grade next year.

And despite my less than positive feelings about middle school, Jordan, I know that if you can beat cancer twice, middle school won't be much of a problem for you!

Last week, Dean Candler mentioned how the peace of God is different from the peace of the world. Through this incredible church community I found the peace of God, and a family that was comforting and there for me even when the peace of the world went askew.

When one of our beloved members, Parker Berman, passed recently, my first phone calls were to other kids from the church. The whole week after Parker's death, we met up every day after school, and were comforted by each other's presence. That week reminded me again of the power of community.

In our pain, we came together and experienced the power of the resurrection, shown through the care and love that only exists in holy community.

As I graduate, I'm leaving this wonderful church behind. But one thing I will take away in the next chapter of my life, is the importance of seeking out a faith community, wherever I may be.

To all of the younger kids in the community, such as you, Jordan, I urge you to find a deeper level of community. Go to bible study and the retreats; really get to know the other members, youth leaders and clergy.

To the older kids in this room, and to those who are kids at heart; my message to you is go a little deeper in this community of faith.

Let me say it this way: "Men and women of Galilee, why are you standing there? Go and seek out community!"