

Sunday, March 30, 2014

Anne Hughes, Co-Director of Silver Lake Conference Center

Sermon – “The Power of Camp”

Philip 4:7

Stand Firm in the Lord

...6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

John 14:27

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

I bring you greetings from Silver Lake Conference Center, your camp and retreat center that you, Salisbury Congregational church community, have embraced as a partner church in this sacred Outdoor Ministry right here in God’s Backyard. You are not just supporters, but active members in creating a dynamic opportunity to experience peace-making and the barn-raising of our youth and future church.

I’d like to share with you these journal reflections that were written last weekend by our 6th-8th graders who participated in our Maple Sugaring weekend retreat. They were sent forth by their deans to seek out a place alone in the woods, and use all their senses to “take in” nature. Then write down what they saw felt and heard, and where they saw God in nature...

Let me read just a few:

“I see Him in the trees. He shines down on me through the pine needles, warming me. I am alone. It is only God and I, and I am at peace. I go back to the cabins from Bon Voyage last summer, and though I am grateful for all the memories, I am also sad due to missing all the friends I may never see again. The snow crunches down under my feet, which is the only sound present. It has felt like a long time since I have felt so peaceful.”

“The trickle of the water surrounds your world. You feel safe in God’s watch. Tranquility. You breathe deeply and know, God made this for you...”

“I am sitting here with God, gazing down on hills upon hills of trees. The light filters in and lies dappling the forest floor. God is all around me. I feel his presence. Looking up, the branches are reaching on to grab at the sunlight. Deer tracks lead off to some unknown place.”

“I see a beautiful stream with a waterfall. I hear nature calling my name.”

“I hear the water rushing like waves hitting shore. I feel a sense of security and freedom. I feel everything around me disappear, and only nature is there to care for me.”

And I ask you, do you not hear that longing for peace, and peace-filled experience in these? We wonder why this is not more common to the core of every day childhood experience, and the answer lies in why the Power of Camp is ever more crucial to our future world and church. Yet we know that the average American child spends only 4 minutes a day playing outside. But when they come to Silver Lake for a week, they spend about 1780 minutes in nature! What is the power of that kind of time, in this kind of setting, and what is that power times 1000 campers every summer?

A recent article by John Longhurst called, “Bringing the ‘nones’ (those who claim no religious affiliation) back to church.... In the Winnipeg Free Press, Longhurst comments on the findings of Elizabeth Drescher, author of a new book about why people are leaving churches, called “Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Life of America's Nones” (due out in the Fall). How is this related to ‘the power of camp’? Well, Drescher finds that, instead of seeking spiritual fulfillment in church services, people are seeking it in what Drescher calls the “4Fs of contemporary spirituality: family, friends, food and Fido.”

"People feel most connected to whatever they understand as God, the divine, a higher power when they're deeply engaged in the fabric of everyday life, spending time with family, with friends, preparing and sharing food, enjoying their pets," she says. Interestingly, these are the same things that church-goers list as spiritually meaningful, and by the way, members of both groups (church goers and nones-) rank attending worship services "as the least important way to experience God."

What can churches do to win back these "nones?"

Drescher reports that most "nones" she interviewed have no desire to return to church. But if they were to do so, they would be interested in churches that found new and unique ways to help them deepen their experience of God, and "connect to the world in meaningful ways."

By way of example, she points to how some churches are now taking services outside of their buildings to places like pubs and parks and doing things like "liturgical hikes" -- group hikes in nature that conclude with communion: or camp-hosted worship, like how Salisbury Congregational worships in the summer at Silver Lake. Or covenant serving of community meals in Bridgeport with Bridgeport Congregational Church.....and choir exchanges!

Practical involvement in the community and around the world is also important, she says, noting that a number of the "nones" said they admire Jesus.

"For half of the people I interviewed, the Jesus of radical compassion and justice remained spiritually and ethically significant, regardless of religious identification, affiliation or practice," she says, adding that some "nones" may be "yearning for a more ethically engaged, prophetic Christianity."

We in Outdoor Ministry, at Silver Lake, believe that getting our conferees engaged prophetically with the growing of our food in the garden, composting our food waste, using the composting toilet, learning about ways to reduce our carbon footprint and Love the Earth... and save our planet...and make maple syrup.....is just as important and called, as finding engaged, radical ways to 'Love God, Love Our Neighbors, and Love Ourselves'. We believe that Outdoor Ministry is not just a pretty screensaver, to stare out at in between our to-do lists, but a way of life to immerse ourselves in, a way to have first-hand sensory experiences of God, creation, beloved community making, and an opportunity to have more than 3.5 minutes per week of intense conversations with adults. We believe it is where we can have more face-to-face time in sacred conversations with adults who feel called to serve in this setting, and it becomes an opportunity for so many young people to make new friends with people they otherwise might never spend a weekend or week with. We are celebrating this Silver Lake Sunday as a way of celebrating creating opportunities for Salisbury's youth, and 1000 other youth to push themselves to try new challenges by choice, in a safe environment.....and participate in beloved community-building, so this next generation can go forth and be that ethically engaged, prophetic Christian leadership in our world, in our schools, in our communities and beyond.

I'd like to end with the prayer written collectively by 2013's Maple Sugaring conferees:

"God, your presence engulfs me. I hear you in the stream, babbling beside me. I see your touch in the bark of the trees. The snow sparkles like a diamond. I am one with the trees, the cool air, the crunchy snow that blankets the ground. I see my reflection in the river and I see you standing next to me. Everything was created and is living because of you. When I think I am alone, I am really at God's side. Amen!"

"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

This is truly the power of camp, that we call Silver Lake, and a witness to the power of partnerships like Salisbury Church, the CT Conference of the UCC, and your faithful investment in the sacred Outdoor Ministry and the youth that are the future church. You are helping let not these hearts be troubled, nor afraid. You are helping these young people experience peace that they have not felt in a very long time. And that, Salisbury Church, is surely worth celebrating!!!

Amen.