

Good Morning!

In case you haven't figured it out yet, my theme this morning is a departure from the Common Lectionary. Rather than focus on the Old Testament reading from 2 Samuel about King David and the Ark of the Covenant or the reading from Mark's Gospel about the beheading of John the Baptist, I wanted to focus on something a little more present and at the forefront of my thoughts; and frankly a little more enjoyable too. You see my daughters are about to head off to camp at Silver Lake Conference Center for the next two weeks. For those of you unfamiliar, Silver Lake is part of the Southern New England Conference and serves as the Conference's center for outdoor ministry. If you have children or grandchildren that are looking for an educational, spiritual, outdoor summer experience, or if you are looking to participate in some outdoor worship experiences, I encourage you to take a look at their website for more information. OK...you didn't come to church this morning to hear me do an advertisement, so I'll get on with it.

I grew up in the Great North Woods. For those unfamiliar with the Great North Woods it spreads across the topmost parts of NY, VT, NH, and ME along the Canadian border; for me specifically, head north to White Mountains and when you get to the other side, there you are. This was an amazing place to grow up. I was surrounded by green forests – even in the winter; rivers and lakes for fishing and swimming; mountains for hiking and skiing; and wildlife of every variety from eagles to bears, moose to porcupine. In many ways this was my Garden of Eden. Some of my fondest memories were spending days in the woods behind my grandparent's house exploring, playing hide and seek, or hiking in search of mysteries and adventure – even if they were only in our heads. I remember working on my Orientation Merit Badge with a friend and hiking from the edge of town to the maple sugar shack on Cates Hill with nothing but a topographical map, a compass, and canteen of water. We made record time by the way; best in the troop. There were very few swimming pools up there, but lots of swimming holes to cool off on the hot summer days.

The interesting thing is that I never really appreciated what I had back then, until I was much older. Yes, there were times when being outside in nature was the only thing I wanted to do, but as I got older things changed. I didn't like living in the middle of nowhere. Yes, we lived in the biggest city in the Great North Woods of NH, but when you see Concord, Portland, Boston, or Sherbrooke, your home town looks pretty small and the beauty of nature around you isn't always seen as the benefit and grace that it should be.

When I returned to this part of NH later in life with a group of students from Upward Bound, I began to have a greater appreciation for what the Good Lord had provided for me while growing up. The ability to see thousands of stars in the sky; to see a moose munching on river grass on the other side of the stream; to see an eagle dive into the river after a trout; or watch the moon rise over the summit of Mount Washington on a clear winter's night; these are gifts to be treasured and appreciated.

When Flannery and I got married and started our family, we wanted to make sure our children had the opportunities to see these things and to learn to appreciate them. To that end we've tried to find them activities that get them out into nature as much as possible. When we'd make trips up North to visit my parents, I'd make sure to take them to some of the places I experienced as a child, like hiking to Glen Ellis Falls or showing them the Green Mountains and Canadian Appalachians from the top of Cates Hill. We are fortunate to live on Flannery's family farm where the girls have a daily opportunity to hike in the fields and woods and to see wildlife from our friendly neighborhood red hawk swooping through the apple orchards looking for food to the great blue heron that frequently stops to eat in Nonnie's pond; the deer that stop to eat the fallen apples in the fall to the turkeys running around looking for bugs and seeds. And every summer they go to Arcadia and/or Silver Lake for camp to learn about God, nature, and our place with both. They never seem to tire of it and they are almost always in awe of what God has created for us in nature.

I encourage you to get outside in nature (go into your garden, go to the woods, go to the shore, go to the river) and marvel at what God has created for us. Yes, God created it for us to live (providing food, water, clean air), but also to enjoy; to be at peace; and most important to be at one with God. To borrow, and paraphrase, from a song by Jewel Akens, go outside and experience "The birds and the bees, and the flowers and the trees, and the moon up above, and a thing called love."