

“Standing Tall on the Hillside “

Rev. Kathryn Nelson

Luke 13: 10 – 17

August 21, 2022.

Peace United Church of Christ, Duluth for the Lighting of the Peace Bell Tower

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O God, our Rock, and our Redeemer.

I want to thank Pastor Jim and the 150th Anniversary Committee, chaired by Marsha Hystead, for inviting me to be here and giving me the honor of preaching this day. It is so exciting that the Bell Tower will now be lit each night. Thank you, Bud Trnka and Dave Courtright, for all your work on this. It is such an important symbol for this congregation. And it now is standing tall on this hillside of Duluth, even at night.

Origin stories are so important to a person’s and a community’s identity. Peace Church has some great stories, especially the stories about the three bells. The first bell was a gift from German Emperor Wilhelm I in 1874. Emperor Wilhelm didn’t send a bell, but rather an ornate cannon captured from the French at the surrender of Metz during the Franco-Prussian War. The cannon would be melted down in a foundry at Troy, New York into a bell. During WWI when there was a great deal of anti-German sentiment in the United States, the congregation was asked to take the bell down and recast it as a weapon. The congregation resoundingly said no, echoing Amos call to turn swords in to plowshares.

The second bell is on loan from the Navy from the USS Asscella. The receiving of it was part of the celebration of the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway and of the congregation's move to this site. This site was originally the city's gravel pit.

Harold Paschke and others including Joan Severson's husband Wally, were able to get it for a very good price when it went up for auction. No one else came to bid on it and so Harold who had three bids in his pocket was able to give the low one. It was that same year in 1959 that the congregation formally changed its name from St Paul's Evangelical Church to Peace Church.

The third bell was from melted down munitions from the local VFW. The bell was cast in Holland. The bell tuning was done over the phone with the bell makers in Holland were listening as the other two bells were rung here.

The tower was built on this site so the bells could ring out across the neighborhood. Originally the tower was a lovely aqua color. Perhaps to match the carpet and walls inside the sanctuary, very stylish in the late 50's.. In the 1990's Mary Martin spent years repainting the sanctuary to a more neutral cream. I also remember two other important workers. One day, Jim McLean and his son Andy went up the bell tower with their climbing gear on in an effort to fix one of the bells. I received a desperate phone call from a member of the community, "get them down from there. I will send you a check for 10,000 to have it done right." And she did.

Over these last 150 years there have been so many people creating together this people called Peace, a church standing tall in the hillside. The stole I wear today

made by Gail Blum represents this. It is created from hundreds of tiny squares. Each tiny scrap of fabric was cut from the clothing of everyday people. Much of fabric from Goodwill, sewn and glued into place representing the beautiful rainbow tapestry that is you, this amazing congregation.

When I wear it I am reminded of a quote by Alice Walker in her book *The Color Purple*. Shug says to Celie, “Have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show up. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God. “

You have come and continue to come to this place on the hillside to share God. You come listening to one another and so many others from the community, often those who have often been shut out or bent over.

The gospel lesson for today is a powerful example of the radical welcome that we as disciples of Jesus are called to give. The woman who enters the synagogue in this Gospel story was bent over. She was bent over physically, but perhaps even more importantly she had been bent over spiritually. In that time the woman’s sickness was seen as God’s punishment for sin. Her kyphosis meant that she was considered unclean and therefore unwelcome. She had been cast aside and cast out of the community.

It was an act of great courage for her to go to the synagogue, a place she knew she was not welcome. But she dares to go slipping in quietly to take her place

behind the grill work in the back, which separated the women and children from the worshipping men.

*As Joyce Hollyday wrote in her book *Clothed with the Sun*, “It’s hard to imagine what it must have been like for this woman who had not stood straight for 18 years, broken in body as well as spirit. Every day for 6,570 days, she woke up bent with pain, her field of vision restricted to the ground, knowing that those who saw her saw only a pathetic, crippled woman. At Jesus call, she hesitated, wondering if he really meant her. Then she slowly shuffled toward him, afraid. All eyes on her. She could not move very fast, and the seconds must have felt as agonizing days. The crowd parted to let her through. Jesus reached out. What joy broke forth when she was cured! Her life was suddenly flooded with hope. She was able to look Jesus in the face. It is no wonder that her immediate response was to sing the praises of God.”*

Jesus’ touch heals her. How did he touch her? I’d like to think he got down on his knees in the dirt. He was the one looking up in her face. Tenderly he would have touched her feet with his hands, just like the women who held his just a few weeks later at the foot of the cross. Luke introduces the God who dares to get dirty, who gets on hands and knees with us.

And the story doesn’t end there, Jesus calls this woman a daughter of Abraham. The Bible speaks frequently of sons of Abraham, the seed of Abraham, children of Abraham; but nowhere else in scriptures is a reference made to a daughter of Abraham. It was a title of great honor and he spoke it out loud so all could hear,

this was perhaps the most important part of her healing.

Jesus was telling her and all those around her that she was part of the family of Israel, a member of the community. Through Jesus' touch and affirmation, the woman could stand tall. His action will always be a model for the church. We must take seriously the healing of those who are bent over by political systems, patriarchy, religious rigidity, or the isms of any kind.

I give thanks for having been part of this community that stands tall on this hillside, following the way of Jesus and welcoming so many kinds of people into this community. It has happened in so many ways and by so many people over the years.

For instance, one of our first remodeling projects was to put in an elevator. This effort was led by Kelly Larson. Kelly Larson now Kelly Lundberg, after marrying Eric Lundberg, grandson of Bill and Barb Kehtel (there have been 8 generations of Kehtels in our congregation). And yes there have been several confirmation romances in my time here. Back when Kelly was just 10 years old, she started collecting pennies at the church for an elevator. She wanted it so that Amanda Cran another child of our congregation would not have to have her wheelchair pushed out the front door and down the back driveway to get to events in the fellowship hall. We had the money raised in a matter of months. Stand tall daughters of Abraham.

I also remember back in 2010 our congregation held a series of forums on Marriage Equality, drawing inspiration from the General Synod Resolution passed in July of 2005 for marriage equality for all. At one of our forums one of our state representatives Roger Reinert led a discussion. He was very worried as he saw the religious right becoming more and more organized around denying marriage equality for all. He warned us, “You need to organize. This is a crucial moment.” And folks took that call very seriously with the creation of the Open Our Hearts, Opening Our Doors interfaith gatherings.

And Gary Anderson of our congregation took the lead with one very special event On February 13, 2011 he held Love in Action, A Valentine from Duluth. It was the creation of a giant valentine’s day heart of people. Everyone was wearing red and singing songs like “We’re going to the chapel and we’re gonna get married”. We stood together in the parking lot of First United Methodist Church. Gary had a big lift videotaping us. He sent that video to our state legislators, and it made a difference. It was amazing all those hundreds of people speaking up and singing out for marriage equality. We were a sea of red looking up. Stand tall children of Abraham.

Your advocacy work continues in so many ways like in being a sanctuary congregation. Thank you, Charlotte, for all your organizing. This immigrant welcoming work growing out of generations of care for immigrants, supporting refugees from Vietnam during Rev. John Pegg’s time here. The Taste of Saigon Restaurant grew from the family that was sponsored by our congregation. And even many more people like the Craguns, working with people fleeing Central

America. Steve O’Neil and Angie Miller had their car confiscated at the Canadian border for transporting people to freedom. Stand tall children of Abraham.

Children and Youth will always be a crucial part of this community. I give thanks for all those who have worked with our kids and youth over the years – so many incredible people and staff just in my time with you– staff like Jan, Shivon, Julie, Kim, Tony, Cynthia, Jonie, Paul, Jackie, Mark, Kelli, Nathan and Sharon. Five of our youth ministers went on to be ordained. Thank you to Sharon for pivoting and creating covid cardboard kids as placeholders in the sanctuary until the actual kids could return. And I knew Nathan was a good fit for Peace when just days on the job on his very first work camp with us to West Virginia he cleaned up after a youth who had gotten sick on the bus due to the windy ride up the mountain to our work site late at night. His music also adds so much too.

Over the years there have been so many transformative youth trips. Canoe trips and over 25 work camps where youth would work for a week – playing with kids, sorting clothes, cooking, serving food and repairing homes. Thank you Jim, Dan and Warren—we could never have done it without your building skills. On that same trip to West Virginia they completely replaced a kitchen floor and sink that had rotted out. Our kids worked to clean out that house for a family devastated by the meth epidemic.

But most importantly on all those trips the youth learned about the sources of oppression and discrimination that deeply effect so many people’s lives. As one girl wrote after that trip to Philippi West Virginia, “We gave hope to a family who

was running out. The oldest girl was 10 but so wise beyond her years; she helped to raise her siblings. I got to see into her world and my troubles paled next to hers. I received joy from her smile. . . We cleaned and painted their bedrooms, washed their dogs, and overall created a better place for a family to live.” On our service learning trips the youth came to know there was and always will be much work to be done to help people stand tall.

And now you are bringing David Hogg here this Fall to speak out against gun violence. What a great use of the PK (prioritize kids) fund. We must continue to work to stop the violence of word and action. One of the most difficult moments in the life of this congregation was the death of Gregg Nugent. Gregg was such a kind young man with a love for fixing cars, like his vintage Firebird with his dad, Mike. One horrible fall morning Gregg felt he could not take one more day of the bullying he was receiving at high school and acted on impulse.

Out of the depths of that grief over Gregg’s death many of our youth, Gunnar, Sylvie, Courtney, and others organized and went to the state capitol to rally for the passage of the safe school act. And Ella Brown organized a walk at East High School to try to end bullying that was so prevalent. Stand tall children of Abraham.

As I was thinking of the kyphotic woman in today’s scripture, I was reminded of one more bent over woman from our congregation, Audrey. Audrey Ruble too so loved the kids of this church. She often kept sweets in her purse and the kids knew to run and find her after worship. Audrey was diagnosed with rheumatoid



arthritis when she was in college. With much practice she was able to walk down the aisle at her wedding but those were some of her last steps. She and her husband Earl were vital members of this congregation. Earl designed the education wing of the building – okay we forgive him for the flat roof.

What I remember about Audrey was the joy she found in life. Audrey lived beyond her disease and in no way let it determine her story. She was never cured of her arthritis, but in so many ways she found her own healing. Audrey had the most amazing shoes. Like she always said, “when walking, shoes must be practical, but when only sitting, shoes can be beautiful.” And they were. Audrey would buy the highest heels, the most stylish of shoes. I loved visiting her in her apartment. She too had so many stories of courage to tell. Daughter of Abraham you are healed of your infirmity.

We may not be cured but there can be healing. Peace is an incredible community of healing. Thank you for being a congregation where people can shuffle in and find a place to stand tall. Thank you for being a people who will listen to the stories about God that silenced people need to tell. In this there is healing for us all. As Shug says, “Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God.”

Continue to share God with one another. Stand tall on this amazing hillside. May your light always so shine that people give glory to our God. Amen.