

**Youth Led Services Weekend**  
**June 7/8, 2008**  
**Sermon: Lori Churchill, Youth Minister with Bryan Diehl**

In youth group, we have done an exercise some of you may already be familiar with - you read a scripture passage and without consciously thinking about it, simply say what word or phrase jumps out at you. It can be a powerful way to tap into what God may be saying to you, and I'm always fascinated by what I find. So I decided to do that for the readings from tonight/this morning and here's what I found... "I will show you... I will bless you...faith...follow me". Hmm. This is easy enough to hear, but how do we do it? How do teens do it??"

Teens. Teens are awesome. Parenting them though, is tough. I believe parents are at a disadvantage for many reasons. We battle different forces than our parents did in parenting us, which means we can't really get all of the answers from our most prominent role models. Parents have had such a myriad of models over the years... tough love, behavior modification (STEP), hands on, hands off... it's hard to know what we are supposed to do. Furthermore, there are many forces, which draw children away from the fold. Kids are "hooked in" to everything electronic, they are connected 24/7 with friends and the world in a way we never could have imagined before. These forces in their world are monumental... and the ever present issues of drugs, alcohol and sex are compounded by bigger issues of moral and spiritual development.

**I asked Bryan Diehl, a sophomore at Wachusett, to help me out this morning. So, Bryan, am I missing anything?**

I'D SAY YOU HIT IT RIGHT ON. STAYING TRUE TO FAITH AND RELIGION IS HARD WHEN OUR ENTIRE WORLD CAN CHANGE AS QUICKLY AS WE CHANGE EVERY CLASS. FAILED ENGLISH TEST - A FEELING OF UNHAPPINESS AND WORTHLESSNESS. 5 MINUTES LATER, HOWEVER, YOU'RE IN A SCIENCE CLASS WITH ALL YOUR FRIENDS, LAUGHING AT A STUPID JOKE, ON TOP OF THE WORLD. OUR LIVES ARE REALLY BUSY AND THEY'RE ALWAYS CHANGING.

I believe there are some important things to consider. The world has always been a challenging place. It's probably not helpful to even enter in to a debate whether today's world is more scary or dangerous... it simply is how it is. Organized religion has always had its challenges. The Bible is full of references to this. We need to keep all of this in perspective, knowing we live in a worldly world and that being strong spiritually is hugely difficult, however in our heads we know it helps us battle the everyday grind. This just isn't easy.

**Bryan, what do you think?**

WITH LIVES CHANGING SO FREQUENTLY, AND DIFFERENT INFLUENCES IMPACTING WHAT WE DO, WHETHER NEGATIVELY OR POSITIVELY, IT'S HARD TO FIT THE MOLD THAT PARENTS AND ORGANIZED RELIGION DEMAND.

I don't have all the answers, but I can stand before you and share some insights. To understand teens, it's important to have an overview of adolescent development. If you look at their psychosocial development they are moving increasingly toward independence and in everything they do they are testing things in this regard. This often bewilders and frustrates parents, probably not a bad thing because if parents and teens are enough at odds by the end of adolescence, they can part with perhaps a bit of relief. Seriously, though, it's meant as a time of separation and individuation. The way they learn matures as well. If you think of how we all learn to think, we start in elementary school as being very concrete about how we view the world. Things are because they are, rules matter A LOT. What happens once adolescence approaches? The big question is WHY, and what used to be simple now becomes complicated. Analytic thought propels everyone toward higher learning. We don't have to do a ton of research into spiritual development to figure out that teens would likely be viewing God and religion the same way – thinking more about the why, and beginning to become independent in their more mature relationship with God.

DON'T FORGET ABOUT PEER PRESSURE. WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, HOW I LOOKED WAS HUGELY IMPORTANT. I WAS AFRAID OF HOW MY FRIENDS WOULD THINK OF ME IF I DIDN'T LOOK RIGHT OR DIDN'T FIT IN. IT FEELS LIKE NOW THINGS ARE DIFFERENT... THAT HOW I THINK IS CONSTANTLY BEING WATCHED BY MY FRIENDS. IT'S PROBABLY THE SAME WITH ADULTS. IT'S HARD TO EXPLORE ISSUES LIKE RELIGION WHEN I KNOW MY FRIENDS ARE CONSTANTLY CRITICIZING MY VIEWS, WHETHER THEY'RE SAYING IT OR NOT. SO WHERE CAN WE EXPLORE THE TOUGH QUESTIONS LIKE AM I GOING TO HELL, ARE MY FRIENDS GOING TO BE IN HEAVEN WITH ME IF I GO THERE, WHY SHOULD I BELIEVE IN GOD?

I suppose questioning life, death and spirituality would be hard enough if life were uncomplicated. It isn't. Last year I talked about the stresses of life for teenagers. This year alone we're aware of the lockdown at Quabbin when a teen left live ammunition in the cafeteria, and the recent beating of a WRSD student. The war continues in Iraq. Water shortages make the news, gas prices soar, malaria outbreak and civil unrest in far away nations, and teenagers die. Several of us saw some of the harshness of life up close when we traveled to El Salvador, including Graham. We could make a very long list, but even as I know these guys, I'm sure I don't have it right.

EVEN SMALLER THINGS, LIKE BULLYING, WHETHER INDIRECTLY OR DIRECTLY. PEER PRESSURE. THESE THINGS ARE HUGE IN A TEENAGER'S LIFE.

Recently I had a conversation with my son Andrew who is 12. He enjoys computer games, and was trying to talk with me about a game he's been playing. I personally don't get it, but tried to talk with him...and the conversation led to my saying "it sounds like you want to talk about this. Do most of your friends play?" He said no, looking sad. Best I could say to that is "I think I know how you feel. A big part of my life is church, and I don't have many friends who really get it outside of St. Francis. Leaves me feeling lonely at times." He silently agreed.

So what do we do? We first recognize that teens are complicated at best, and that to really understand them is to be ready to hear from them what their life experience is, in their words, to be prepared to be surprised. This includes teen spirituality, both beliefs and practices. They are developmentally at a point of questioning, and we need to support this process. Next, we need to buy into the notion of community – for support, a sense of belonging, for people to hold us accountable, for an environment where we can grow and learn.

**Bry, why does youth group work for you?**

YOUTH GROUP DOESN'T FORCE RELIGION ONTO ME BUT STILL HAS THE RELIGIOUS REFLECTIONS IN PRAYER TIME THAT REFRESHES MY FAITH RATHER THAN PUTS IT UNDER HARD CORE CONSTRUCTION.

I would want to say that youth group doesn't work for everyone, but I do think the concepts we use can work for everyone, adults as well as teens. In youth group, we do three basic things. We hang out in community together and we pray together and we do God's work together. First let's talk about hanging out. I often say we do a whole lot of nothing, but we really do A LOT of nothing. Teens need a place where they are not expected to do anything, where they can relax and have fun and be silly... and eventually the important things bubble to the surface. Any group that's been together a while and had a chance to mature should be cohesive enough to handle and hold anything that emerges, and in youth group this covers the gamut from school stress to family stuff to challenging decisions facing them as teens today. I have to say that approaching things with an attitude of low expectations really can work. This has been a way we have been invited into their world and be there with them as they need us to be.

We also pray. It's beautiful, sacred, sometimes awkward and uncomfortable, but always familiar. Many kids say it's why they come to youth group, and many college kids come back for the experience they deem so precious. Each week it is fleeting, and when I ask the big question "where is God" it's so often met with blank stares, but that's OK. We bumble through it, hold each others' hands, do our best to build a shaky skill. All that matters is that we're intentional...we try.

Finally, we do God's work. We care for each other, and in the greater world, we fast for hunger, walk for hunger, travel on mission trips. We do what St. Francis said for us to do, to preach the Gospel at all times, and use words when necessary. Doing God's work helps us to feel God's presence in an extraordinary way. Once we feel it, we want more, and I think this is what happens to these teens. They may not completely understand it – I don't believe we need to – they simply FEEL it, and follow it.

**BRYAN I think this is why things work. What did I miss?**

THINGS BUBBLE TO THE SURFACE BECAUSE IT'S NOT DRAWN OUT OF US. THERE ISN'T AN EXPECTATION THAT WE HAVE TO DO THINGS A CERTAIN WAY. WHEN IT COMES TO FRIENDS AND PEOPLE OUTSIDE OF YOUTH GROUP, IT'S ABOUT ACHIEVING THE "RIGHT OR WRONG" WHERE IN YOUTH GROUP IT'S ABOUT FIGURING OUT THE PROCESS. I'VE FOUND THAT YOUTH GROUP HAS LEFT ME

WITH MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS, AND IT SEEMS WE'RE ALL OK WITH THAT.

As the parish family, we have cradled our kids in this experience for as long as I've been here. It happened for years prior to my being youth minister and I'm certain it will outlive me. This parish is healthy and strong, and these kids all know that. They know the expectations for greatness with the tolerance for individuality and creativity. What an enormous gift. I really do believe that as families we do this, perhaps as bumbling as the teens are when they pray, but the point is we do it, and we keep trying to do it.

Here in this space, we're reminded of HOPE and FAITH. Hope makes all things possible, helps us endure because we believe that things will work out somehow. Faith is the belief that God, the GOD AND PARENT of all, is constantly at our side, guiding us, caring for us, making sure it will all work out somehow.

So I'll return to where I started. ... "I will show you... I will bless you...faith...follow me". Maybe it really IS that easy.

Amen.