

Pastor Kevin Garman

Theme:

Story: My Summer Vacation & Mohawk Chief

August 15th, 2021

"Summer Reflections: This Land's a Good Land"

Last week we talked about my adventures through Washington State, Idaho, and making my way back through Missoula. We looked at the theme of spontaneity and moving with the Holy Spirit. We concluded by listening to the song, "Blowing in the Wind" by Bob Dylan. This week we will continue to engage with how the Holy Spirit moves us and shapes us. As promised last week, you get the tales from my Missoula camping trip of evading the killer Grizzly of East Montana, more thoughts from driving, and reflections from the banks of the Missouri River. We continue with asking the question, "What does it mean to be human?" and we engage with this question in a little different way this morning as we look to the past, present, and future.

There is something about camping that always takes one's soul back to a time before the modern world. It illuminates these innate skills and instincts pushed deep inside our being, almost forgetting this was life at one point. Moving from hunting ground to hunting ground, foraging whatever we could, and seeking shelter from the elements and predators lurking in the shadows. Camping, at least for me, reminds me of how little we actually know about living and experiencing our world as much as we like to kid ourselves. The real world, the natural world, is unforgiving, violent, inconsiderate, and lacks any remorse for the downtrodden and weary. It may not be all, "nasty, bruttish, and short..." as the bleak poem, *Leviathan*, from philosopher Thomas Hobbes describes, however, just as we experience the ups and downs of life, the ups and downs of the natural world exist as well, which reminds us, not all things in the wild are scary and life-threatening. Camping gives you the best of both worlds.

So where had I finally found this magical, elusive camping spot I had been searching for all trip? Lolo National Forest was my lifesaver this evening as the Lolo campground was the only campground I had found that was open. Some of this was probably due to the wildfires from the west making their way east. It didn't matter though. I had found my spot, camping spot #11 quietly tucked just around the corner of the campground. I made sure I was allowed to have a fire (I was albeit a small one), made a sandwich for dinner, turned on my Spotify playlist for camping, and took in

the fresh, cool mountain air of the Rockies. My physical body was still there in the Lolo campground, but my mind was off in some far distant land as I found my peace and rest that evening.

My night was uneventful, which is a great problem to have in a National Forest with Grizzly bears, mountain lions, and wolves in some parts deeper than I was. As soon as I posted my pictures on social media that morning, I received several comments from friends in the area. They, for some reason, were concerned with my camping choice asking if I was east or west of Missoula. Thankfully my answer was West or I may have never forgotten my Lolo campground experience.

A grizzly bear had killed a woman east of Missoula the night I went camping. The woman attacked was camping outside of Ovando, MT. The Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks had been monitoring the bear for some time as it had gotten into a local's chicken coop days before the incident. Sadly the camper was on a trip of a lifetime as she was on a cycling trip from California. At some point, the other campers had mentioned they had food in their tent either the previous night or previously that day, even though the food was secured in a bear box at the time of the attack. The grizzly's impeccable sense of smell told the bear there was still food in that tent though. Thankfully I was west of Missoula and this bear left me alone, which certainly made me happy and put my Facebook friends at ease. May the camper rest in peace, and her friends and family find peace in this tragedy.

It was time to pack up though and make my way to my reserved hotel in Great Falls, MT. Havre, MT was my final destination to visit with my girlfriend for a few days before making my return to Glendive, and Great Falls was a nice stopping point before Havre. It was astounding to witness the change in the landscape, yet again, as I moved away from the forests, ascents/descents of the mountains, and the trees of foliage of the forest, I began seeing the plains slowly emerge with the various yellows of the sprawling wheat grass. Familiar friends began to make their wary appearance as I saw hawks and harriers flying in the sky, grouse and quail diligently searching for their next meal on the periphery of the highway, and the songbirds perching on each mile marker sign as they take a break from their afternoon flight. Even though mountains are where I always want to be and long to be, I was back home on the Great Plains.

Something I began thinking about was how the land we grow up in makes us and breaks us. I grew up on the limestone peninsula of Florida

exploring pinewood forests as a kid and growing up in the swampy humidity of Florida, but since I also grew up in Tennessee, I was also raised in the green greatness of the Holston Valley nestled in the foothills on the Blue Ridge Mountains, Roan Mountain to be specific, where I would find God in nature at Buffalo Mountain United Methodist Church camp. I am not sure what that says about me or what that changed in my life growing up in these places, but it certainly shaped and molded me like a potter's clay taking shape and form on the potter wheel of the earth. Some of you have told me you feel most at home on the Plains because you can see everything in front of you almost as far as your eyes can see, you are not constantly feeling claustrophobic like you do when you go into the mountains as the foliage surrounds you at every corner, and y'all have said the plains feel at home because of the people. In academic jargon, we would call this social location.

Social location is a fancy way of saying communal identity. For example, this is why I can identify as Appalachian even though I have lived in Florida, Tennessee, Virginia, Colorado, and now, Montana, because Tennessee, even though I was not born there, is the culture I grew up being influenced by. I feel as if I was born in the Appalachian mountains because this is where my early identity as a kid was formed. Social location isn't about where you are located geographically as much as it is about how you identify culturally.

I began reflecting on this as I thought of the different peoples who roamed this land long before my Irish ancestors came overseas after successfully helping General Oliver Cromwell in the Glorious Revolution of England. We can go into my family history at another point but I would say it is rather obvious by my translucent, pale skin, I am not a native of this land. I began reflecting on how this changed this land and its people forever when we began interacting with one another in the early 15th century. Much of this country's history with Native Americans is mired in anger, death, broken promises, and a cycle of retaliation which we still see carried out today. I began wrestling with this question again, "what does it mean to be human?"

Maybe this question was on my mind because of the drive and maybe the question was on my mind because of the camper who had just been killed as I traversed on this journey of a lifetime. Once again, the familiar questions presented themselves, "Why am I blessed enough to go on this journey when so many others are in need of basic necessities of life? Why

am I blessed enough to have a job that allows me to take a vacation such as this and then spend 5 Sundays at work telling all my friends about it? Why am I lucky enough and blessed enough in a job that pays me enough to meet my basic needs, desires, and my financial goals? Why am I blessed when I have lived on the in-between of having enough to get by but still not enough to consider yourself well off? I am still searching for these answers and imagine I will be until my final breath, but this is the answer I've come to at this point in my life. Are you ready for the answer?

The answer to those questions is, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter at the moment why I am blessed enough to do these things, but all I can do is work my hardest throughout my life to make sure as many people as I meet have the opportunity to experience what I experienced on this trip, which is life. Too often we are running around worrying about how to say or do something perfectly, we forget to live. Too often we are moving from one task to another as we go from task to task or agenda item to next agenda item instead of appreciating the present. Too often we are blinded by greed, power, and prestige as we chase this image of perfection in which we will never attain. So what do we do with these useless questions? Go and live life!

Make mistakes and go out and fail! Try that thing you have always wanted to try because tomorrow may not be here or tomorrow may bring new troubles and trials in which you have no warning. Go out and live life! These were my thoughts as I stood on the banks of the Missouri River staring up at the statue of Lewis and Clark. Their journey had made plenty of mistakes and encountered plenty of difficult circumstances along their journey. We will continue my reflection of my trip next week when we talk about friendship, underground cities, and the adventures of Lewis and Clark as I travel throughout central Montana and conclude my vacation with a trip to Denver the following week.

In conclusion, I want to share two final stories with you this morning to further reflect on living life and being human. The first story is a fictional story from one of the classics, *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. Spoilers for any of you who haven't watched the films that have been out for almost two decades now and a book trilogy that is nearly one-hundred years old. In one of their bleakest moments in the journey to destroy the One Ring of evil and malice, Perrigrin Took and Gandalf the White face death's door as the orcs and goblins of Mordor are bashing down the final door separating the enemies and the last defense of the soldiers of Gondor. All hope was lost

and death was near. Perrigrin Took looks at Gandalf with tears in his eyes and asks, "I didn't think it would end this way." Gandalf replies, "End? No, the journey doesn't end here. Death is just another path, one that we all must take. The grey rain-curtain of this world rolls back, and all turns to silver glass, and then you see it." Pippin anxiously asks, "What? See what?" With peace in his eyes and hope in his heart, Gandalf the white answers, "White shores, and beyond, a far green country under a swift sunrise." "Well, that isn't so bad," the young hobbit replies. "No. No, it isn't." Life is just as mysterious as death, even though they may seem like two different sides of a coin. Live life, don't just check off lists you've made for tasks and dreams. Live your dreams and live life.

The second story is not my own story, but a story from the introduction of John Philip Newell's new book, *Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul: Celtic Wisdom for Reawakening to What Our Souls Know and Healing the World*. This story is about an encounter John has with an attendant of one of his lectures, a Mohawk elder. There was a particular scripture John had focused on that evening in his lecture. It was from the Gospel of John and it said this, "The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world" (Gospel of John 1:9). This is from the opening verses of John describing Jesus of being the light of the world and also bringing the light of the world. The light which is in all of creation and each of us.

At the end of the lecture, the Mohawk elder approaches John and says this, "As I have been listening to the themes, I have been wondering where I would be tonight, I have been wondering where we would be as a Western world tonight, if the mission that had come to us from Europe centuries ago had come expecting to find light in us" (Newell p 12). These words cut John's heart deep and touched him, even as a Scotsman. What John Philip Newell says next is vital to us moving forward as neighbor's in Christ with people who see life differently than us.

"We cannot undo the tragic wrongs that have been done to Native American peoples during the westward expansion of settlement across what is now the U.S. and Canada, where indigenous human life was seen as having no value and viewed only as a hindrance in the quest for land and its resources. We cannot reverse the injustice, pain, and suffering that resulted from such horrendous greed and arrogance. We can, however, be part of new beginnings. We can open ourselves to a radical humility of heart, which is our true strength, and look with expectation for the sacred deep within the

“other”---the other individual, the other religion, the other race or nation or sexual orientation. And we can look with reverence to serve this sacredness in the other, to honor, nurture it, and come into relationship with it, allowing it to further reawaken in us the sacredness at the heart of our own being as well” (Newell 12-13).

We can't change the past. We cannot dwell in it either. We must move forward with pain in both of our hearts that we have not lived into the image of God by building one another up instead of tearing each other down. We were not told by God that the Kingdom of God would be built easily. It is 2,000 years later and we still anticipate Christ's reawakening of the world as he builds the Kingdom of God here on earth. No one said the Kingdom of God would always be fun, filled with the most pleasant conversations and songs of happiness and glee. The Kingdom of God will require our courage, our strength, our wisdom, and our creativity. Each and every one of us working together. One of my favorite ways to do this is through song.

I confess, I didn't know this song very well before a few weeks ago, but I have been perusing through a book a friend gave me a few years back. It is a collection of folk songs from various regions of the United States. This particular song is not included in the collection, or at least, I didn't find it there. However, I did hear this song from a playlist of collected folk songs. This is “My Land is a Good Land” by Peter Seeger. Let us remember, just as we know we live on a good land, we know we have a lot of good people who make this land, this community, and this congregation what it is. Let us never forget to see the Divine in one another. Amen.