

Sermon “Sanctuary World” – January 21, 2018

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I’d just like to start by thanking you all for hanging in there with me today... I have to admit, I’ve dreamed about running my own service ever since I got to plan one with my confirmation class, but I never thought it would actually happen! When Barb Fletcher came up to me offering me the opportunity I couldn’t believe it, and I truly am honoured (along with absolutely terrified) to be up here speaking to you all today. That said, I didn’t realize how little I knew about planning worship services until I took on this task, and my notes are titled “How to Pretend to be a Pastor”, so I hope I’ve put on a good show thus far.

You, like me, woke up this morning and made the choice to come to church. We all come for different reasons, some because we need spiritual guidance to help us through a trying time, some because life has been really heavy lately and we need words of hope, some because the community and the music refresh and renew us for the week ahead, and, let’s face it, we all come for the great food after the service. Regardless of why you’re here, you’re here.

Now let’s look around and consider exactly where you are. You’re in the sanctuary, which is formally defined as “a holy place”. Most people think of a sanctuary as somewhere with stained glass windows, a beautiful altar, and pews that are way too difficult to get in and out of. However, I think that *that* description simply describes an example of a sanctuary, and doesn’t fully incorporate all that the word encompasses.

In my mind, a sanctuary is so much bigger than a room in a building. I see a sanctuary in my walk to campus, a choir rehearsal, the beautiful lake that I see on my way to school, people working together to finish a project in the early hours of the morning, canoeing across a glassy

lake, a group of my friends getting together to make dinner, and so many other places. This is how the youth at Queen's feel as well.

One night, I was studying with my boyfriend, and we started talking about faith and spirituality, and he told me that a lot of people don't feel connected to the Spirit in a church building, they're simply focused on standing and sitting at the right times, trying to sing the hymns when they can't read music, and trying to relate the Bible and the sermon to their everyday lives. Growing up as a Christian and going to church every Sunday, this was quite a shock, but I quickly heard where he was coming from, and realized that to make church appealing to a younger generation, some modifications to what we've always known are necessary.

Other people feel ostracized by the church. I have friends who are members of the LGBTQ+ community that have experienced hatred when they went to church, and they have no desire to get involved with anything that hurt them before. Every time I mention my faith to someone, I have to remember that this could be their backstory, and as a result, a conversation regarding faith is often swept into a corner.

However, it is important to remember that these same people are also the people that come up to me telling me about experiences that are directly spiritual, but they don't coin them as such. A spiritual experience can be formally defined as something that "relates to or affects the human spirit or soul as opposed to material or physical things". I hear this all the time...

One person came up to me telling me about a time he lay out on the dock at his house on a warm summer night, and gazed up at the stars that seemed to extend forever in every direction. In that moment, he felt connected to something bigger than himself, and in this way

felt the Spirit washing over him in comfort like a warm breeze as he gazed up at the vast beauty that surrounded him.

Another person told me about a time that he served at a soup kitchen, how amazing it felt to give back to people in need, and how interconnected he felt with these people that he had never met. I have no doubt that the Spirit brought him to this group of people because of how large of an impact his wonderful smile, positive attitude, and hard work could make.

Another person described a walk she took to the lake, when everything was piling up on her at school. She simply walked away from it all to find a quiet centre in the midst of insanity. She found it at the shore of the lake, taking in the beauty that God has created. I know that there on the rocky shore where she stood, the Spirit was cradling her and reassuring her stress and anxieties.

Another person finds his spirituality in playing guitar, and uses it to get away from reality, learning new pieces and challenging his skills while letting emotions sail freely into the air. Throughout every mis-strummed chord, every tricky passage he's learned, and every song he's figured out by ear, the Spirit was guiding him, and helping him to channel his emotions into every pluck of the string.

Another person finds spirituality in sailing, getting up before any person should ever be awake and going out on the glassy water, and letting the wind move him onward. Alone with the Spirit, the unseen force of the wind is guiding him. All he has to do is recognize and channel its potential, and allow it to carry him forward. In mimicking the Spirit's role in his life with physical objects, he comes closer to the Spirit and develops his faith.

Another person finds spirituality in meditating. He wakes up and finds a place with little disturbance, and then clears his mind of the bustle of everyday life. As he does this, he blows off the dust of errands and to-do lists and delves deeper into a spiritual connection. It's amazing how much you can do for your mind, body, and Spirit by sitting on the ground for a period of time.

Another person didn't tell me about a specific time, but I saw it in her eyes during one of our Engineering Choir rehearsals. As the song's introduction was played by the pianist I watched her muscles relax, her face soften, and her mind empty of everything but the next note. Through singing, she found tranquility and serenity, and I could almost see the Spirit wash over and through her, being carried through the music.

Clearly, spiritual people are all around me at Queen's. The question still remains though, why aren't they here?

Most of the reason we don't see many of these people here is not directly related to our actions as a congregation. As I was growing up in Ithaca, NY, I joined a United Methodist church that a couple of my friends attended, and it was there that I met some of my friends that I now consider family. I viewed going to church on Sundays as a must because we had an amazing youth program and going to church was a chance to hang out with my friends. This was true for all ages, stemming from a very well-developed youth program that began with toddlers! I strongly believe that the fantastic youth program at our church was the reason that we had so many children and young adults in attendance.

The key to maintaining a youth presence at a church is having a strong program that helps to develop spirituality in these young individuals. My church at home had a program that

fostered spiritual development, but also allowed us to experience the Spirit by enjoying the blessings of life alongside our friends. We'd have movie nights centered around thought-provoking films like *Pay It Forward*, basketball games, mystery trips where we'd all get in the youth group van and see where the leaders had planned our amazing weekend, and mission trips to West Virginia to help those in need. Because of this, we associated fun with enhancing our spirituality and we couldn't wait for the next church event.

The key to making our congregation an attractive and inviting option for youth is to develop programs that make them excited about growing more spiritual. To do so, it is important to have a solid Sunday School program to teach young children what it means to be spiritual, and that church can be more than just the boring service that their parents force them to sit through. With this support alongside their friends, children will start thinking about spirituality and begin to incorporate it into their lives by themselves, instead of parents forcing it upon them against their will. Thus, they will grow into their spirituality alongside their friends, and *that* is the key to bringing youth to our congregation.

In the long run, this process starts with developing and fostering a strong youth program. In the short term, however, I think it's important that we start to break down the barriers that exist between Queen's students and Christianity by holding the infamous Student Dinners. First of all, because students will attend. A delicious dinner with friends that they don't have to cook or pay for? How could anyone turn that down? Once the students are there, the important part becomes communicating to them that we are a loving congregation, and all of the negative connotations that come with the word Christianity in society today do

not apply here. This involves breaking down some well-defined walls between students and Christianity, but this is certainly possible and will make students much more open to church.

Students at Queen's have spiritual aspects of their lives, they're just seeking an opportunity to explore them, whether they recognize that or not. Our congregation could be that place. As we were discussing before, these students at Queen's are mustard seeds. Busy and frequently stressed mustard seeds, but mustard seeds all the same. All they need is some water and an environment in which to grow and develop their faith, and I see no reason why those conditions couldn't be met by this community right here. We could be the water that these mustard seeds need to grow and develop. All we need to do is break the topsoil and the barriers these students have to Christianity, sow these seeds, and watch as these students and our community transform and blossom in the church of tomorrow.