

June 2, 2019 | Youth Sunday

Homily

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

Today's service was organized by the youth around a dual theme of trust and hope. In their wisdom, and perhaps in their need, they recognized that these words were necessary. As the school year comes to a close and the graduating seniors look ahead at what is next to come, these ideas of trust and hope, especially within the context of our faith, are anchors that will allow them to step into this next chapter with confidence and joy.

So Charlotte, Brianna, and Aveion, this is that time of year where you get to hear me say: "When I was your age..." It doesn't seem so long ago, though it was nearly two of your lifetimes ago. We didn't have playlists—we made mix tapes. CDs were the new technology in music, and if you were really technologically advanced you had a portable CD player with an adaptor you could plug into the cigarette lighter of your car. When I was your age, MTV was airing its first reality TV show—*The Real World*. When I was your age we took computer classes in school, but still wrote out all of our papers by hand—they only exception was our annual research paper, which had to be type written. But because you couldn't just delete an error, and because I was not an extraordinary typist back then, my Mom would often type out my hand-written paper.

When I was your age the first war in Iraq was over. I had been afraid that my close friends would be drafted if it went on for too long. We had all just turned 18. We had sung the song "Let there be peace on earth" every Sunday in church until it ended, as we greeted each other with a sign of Christ's Peace. I cried every time. The only other war in my lifetime had been the conflict in Vietnam, and I was a baby as it was ending, though I saw some friends Dads struggling with what I now know was PTSD for years after they returned.

During my high school career I watched a lot of buildings in Pittsburgh change their faces. All of the buildings had been covered in black soot from the steel mills. That era was gone, and so Pittsburgh decided to clean itself up a bit, removing decades of soot from building after building. It was disorienting at first, to see the city change so much. But I got used to it and now have to use my imagination to remember the soot that was there—though I still see the Oakland branch of the Carnegie Library with a black façade.

When I was your age I couldn't spend enough time with my friends, and we cried a lot over the summer anticipating our eventual separation with our first year of college. There were no cell phones—not for personal use at least—and things like Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, Skype, and smart phones were all elements of someone's future imagination...not our immediate present. We would call each other on land lines on phones with long distance plans—or maybe, if we were lucky, we could use a phone card at a payphone to call our friends. I wouldn't know email existed until I got to school. At that point it was only a resources found at colleges and universities. We would go to

the computer lab for hours after dinner and write to our friends—and that is how I learned to type. We were told that the internet would be a thing, but it wasn't yet.

But some things were very much the same:

A lot of hairstyles now were the hairstyles then—especially the ones where you have part of your head shaved or a beautiful color in your hair (though the colors today are much more spectacular than they were then!). We were thinking about voting in our first presidential election and were starting to follow politics more closely. We were concerned about injustice and the environment. We wanted to succeed, to grow unhindered, to discover the depth of our talent as well as the depth of our ability to love. We wanted our dreams to come true, and we wanted the world to continually be a better place.

I'm sure that folks from all of the generations represented here could tell you similar stories. Different social and political milestones, different technological innovations, different concerns mark each era. But there is an undercurrent that is the same. We all want what's best. We all want to thrive. We all want the community around us and the world at large to be better than we left it.

It's fitting in many ways that you picked this theme of hope and trust for today. We think about these words when we think about our friends, our family, our leaders, and even ourselves. And we think of these words when we think of God. Trust gives us a foundation and hope calls us forward. Trust helps us to know we are safe and loved. Hope helps us to take risks and dare to love others.

I know that you saw these qualities in our New Testament lesson for today. You saw the trust and hope of Paul and Silas as they praised God from a prison cell—and you saw it in the slave girl who cried out as she followed them around, naming the power of God within them to save; and you saw it in the prison guard who welcomed Paul and Silas into his home.

You saw how these qualities can open doors: that trust and hope can forge connection, even when crossing social lines; that trust and hope can compel someone to do what's right; that trust and hope can forge change.

These are good qualities to cultivate and to nurture in yourselves. These are good virtues to nurture in another.

But, let's admit it: trust and hope are sometimes hard to come by. It's hard to know who to trust sometimes—especially when we have to set privacy filters on social media and when so many interactions occur without ever looking another person in the eye. And it can be hard to cultivate hope when news of mass shootings and partisan discord discourage us and make us afraid.

And sometimes trust and hope feel impossible if we think that we have to do it alone. If we think that these qualities are ours to manufacture, nurture, grow and share then we have quite our work cut out for us.

Even as our Bible stories issue an invitation to trust—especially to trust in God—we see that God does God’s good work even when humanity falters. When Paul is annoyed at the petulant slave girl, God heals her. When Paul and Silas can’t be bothered by her need, even though she follows them around for *days*, God sees her and breaks the societal and spiritual chains that hold her captive.

See, as we gather here today celebrate your accomplishments and gifts, we do so knowing that God is God. God is the God of your past and God is the God calling you into your future. God has gifted you with many gifts and calls you to put those gifts into action. God has watched over you and given you strength, even when life was difficult. No matter your past stories or present hopes, God sees your need, hears your cries, and is working for your wholeness and the wholeness of all the world.

And so I want to remind you today, though, that God is God always. In Romans, Paul says: “If God is for us, who can be against us?” God shows this to be true in our New Testament Lesson for today. God saves the slave girl; God saves Paul and Silas; God saves the prison guard. God saves.

Hear this good news, knowing that even if your trust and hope falters, God is faithful still. God will have hope in your future even if you don’t know what’s coming next. God is trustworthy even if you don’t know where to turn. God is with you, always.

So trust:

Trust that you are a beloved child of God, fearfully and wonderfully made.

Trust that you have unique gifts, given to you for a beautiful purpose, and that these gifts will bless the world.

Trust that you are not alone. God is with you, and you are surrounded by many—even us—who are hoping for a bright future for you and cheering you on. We’re also here for you if you have questions, if life is difficult or if you are afraid.

Trust that your parents have your best interests at heart.

Trust your gut.

Trust that people are basically good.

Trust that God loves everyone—not just you or others like you. Then follow God’s lead and shower this world in love.

Trust that God desires your wholeness—spiritually, physically, mentally, socially, financially—and seek God’s guidance continually.

Trust that God desires not only your wholeness, but the wholeness of all, and so act justly, compassionately and mercifully.

Trust that God hears your cries.

Trust that your voice matters—and so does your vote

Trust that things are going to change—some for the better, some not so much.

Trust that as you move forward in life you are stepping into the future from a foundation of faith and love that will support you through it all.

And then dare to step into this next stage of your adventure filled with the hope that you can make a positive impact on this world—I know it to be true, because you already do. Hope that justice will prevail, forgiveness is possible, and that love will win. Hope that with God, all things are possible.

But as we send you out into the world today, my prayer is that you will act on this trust and this hope so that they are more than just warm and fuzzy feelings—but virtues enacted, making a difference in the world.

I trust that this is possible because I’ve had the privilege of watching you grow up. I’ve seen you nurture your God-given gifts. I’ve seen you care for others. I’ve seen you grow in wisdom and compassion. I’ve seen your faith flourish as you’ve set an example for others. I’ve seen you work hard.

And through you, I have hope, that God can even change the world.