

“Come closer”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 24:1-6 and Luke 24:36-49

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Who remembers the scene in John Hughes’ 1986 film “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off” where the three teenagers skipping high school go to an art museum? It’s not the typical adventure of rebellious adolescents—we wish, right, parents?—but it’s this really delightful scene, with no talking, set to dreamy music, as Ferris, Sloane, and Cameron link hands with a chain of children following their teacher, and stare at paintings, and imitate the posture of a Rodin sculpture. For Ferris and Sloane, it’s a game, an opportunity to mock art and slip away into some stained glass corner and smooch. But for Cameron, it’s something more serious.

The scene ends with Cameron staring at George Seurat’s pointillist painting *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*. Pointillism is this art technique of creating thousands of points, or dots, of paint, that combined create an image. In this particular painting, people are happily lounging on a grassy lawn overlooking a river, and at the center is this little girl, dressed in white, with a sun hat, holding her mother’s hand, and she’s looking at you, the viewer. Cameron, in the film, stares back. The camera alternates between shots of his face and the face of the little girl, each time zooming in. As Cameron comes closer and closer to this little girl, he sees himself in her: someone who, on the outside, seems to have a normal, good life, but the closer you look, the more it falls apart, disintegrating into fragments, dots. In truth, Cameron is a struggling, scared, depressed teenager with a dominant but emotionally absent father and no mother. And it’s this moment of looking closer that triggers a huge change in Cameron’s life as he begins to assert his own identity.

Something powerful happens when we come closer.

We did it just yesterday, on our contemplative hike, these monthly walks we do in silence and prayer. And at first, it just looked like any other wooded path, but then we came closer, and we discovered a dozen different kinds of wildflowers, and turtles sunbathing on a log, and the changing sounds of water, and these little white butterflies dancing, and more than that, we felt our own heartbeats, and the ground beneath our feet, and the muscles moving in our bodies, and the breeze and sunlight on our skin, and the joy opening within us.

It happened also, the day before, when I was in our backyard with our son. Emerson found a bug in his sandbox, got scared, and demanded I remove it. So I picked it up, and placed it on a tree, and invited Emerson to come closer and look at it, not something scary at all, but this tiny, iridescent, green, winged insect.

It happens all the time, in fact. Look through a microscope at a drop of creek water, and suddenly this inert glob becomes a fervor of microscopic life, a whole civilization you had no idea was there. Look through a telescope, and you can lasso the planets and the stars, and bring close eons

of imagination and myth. Join a Bible study or a book group, and words catch fire, as they are subjected to analysis, opening layers and layers of meaning you never saw before. Spend an hour with someone you love, choosing to be fully present with them, their smell, their touch, their feelings, their thoughts, and you will fall more in love. It's a principle that undergirds everything from medicine to engineering to music to romance to faith: come closer, and you'll learn.

It's so obvious that it wouldn't bear speaking, except for the fact that we forget it so often. We get mad at someone, for example, and rather than talking about it (coming closer), we pull away. We do a lot of that—pulling away. From relationships, from nature, from God. We skirt surfaces, opting for abstract and simplified answers. How many people talk about poverty without ever having experienced it? It's just an idea for them. We distance ourselves from people we don't understand or don't like, or whose experiences and thoughts differ from our own, and then we wonder why it's so easy to hurt them, or judge them, or oppress them. Because we're all so far away from each other, from God.

When the resurrected Jesus shows up in our story in the Gospel of Luke today, the disciples are far away. They don't believe. They're still trying to process the concept of resurrection. They're standing all the way over here, trying to compute a revelation, and it's not working. Now, a lot of us, if we were in Jesus' position, we'd try to argue with the disciples, persuade them. But Jesus knows that's not going to work here. There's only one solution. He says: Come closer. Touch and see me. Feel the wounds on my body, the carpentry callouses on my hands, the rough soles of my feet that walked miles with you. Look into my eyes, hear my voice, eat with me. Jesus invites them to experience his presence.

And of course, all of this is possible because he has come closer to them. He's come to them, in the upper room. That's the whole idea of the gospel—that God came closer to us, in the person of Jesus Christ, experiencing our humanity, suffering with us, dying with us. God knew we couldn't close the gap, so God did. Now, all the disciples have to do is take one step, just reach out and touch the resurrection. And it's vital that they do so.

Before they can believe, before they can go out into the world to proclaim the good news, they first have to come close and experience Jesus for themselves. Jesus eats with them, and then—and only then—does he send them out.

Why? Because something happens when we come closer, just as it did to Cameron in that art museum, and to us yesterday on our hike, and to Emerson as he examined a bug.

Coming closer makes you care. Love is always concrete, never abstract. Love isn't being aware that people are dying in a hospital; it's being in that hospital and holding their hands. It's easy not to care about God or people or nature when you have no experience of them. But when you get to know them, you come to love them.

Coming closer also makes you appreciate their nuance and complexity. The more you look, the more you realize how inadequate your assumptions and ideas were. You begin to humbly receive their mystery.

Coming closer makes you believe. Don't believe in God? Come here, and sit among a community striving to love each other, and hold each other up, and who are being daily transformed by grace. Don't believe that the world's climate is changing? Go to the Pacific Islands, where water is rising and swallowing their lands; witness thousands of displaced environmental refugees; hold their children. Go to the glaciers that are melting, and the people who are suffering from increased natural disasters, and the species that are going extinct every year, and the rainforest that is burning. It will be hard not to believe then.

And finally, coming closer makes you act. It's not enough to hear about God; we have to experience God, just as the disciples did in that upper room, before we can tell others. It's not enough to hear about all the problems of the world; we have to come closer and witness them for ourselves before we can take action.

These two words hold the key to everything. Want to stop hate and foster love? Come closer. Want to grow your faith and witness to others? Come closer. Want to repair your relationships? Come closer. Want to experience joy? Come closer.

And because we're marking Earth Day today: Want to save the planet? Come closer. If we want to foster in people a renewed commitment to God's commandment to be good stewards of this earth, we have to create for them, and for ourselves, daily opportunities to come closer to the wonders of creation. Children need to climb trees, and jump in puddles, and watch bird eggs hatch, and make forts in the woods. We need to dig our hands into wet, dark soil. We need to go hiking, canoeing, camping. We need to experience our national parks. We need to turn off our earbuds and learn the song of birds. We need to fall in love again with the woods and the hills and the lakes. We need to appreciate their complexity. We need to believe that they matter, and that we're a part of them, and that they're in danger. We need to witness what the absence of green space means for children in a city; we need to stand at the graves of people who have died because companies have dumped chemicals into rivers and soil. Because only then will we have the will to act.

God has already given us this beautiful, bountiful world; all we have to do is experience it. God has given us all these wondrous people of so many different colors and cultures and abilities and identities and ideas; all we have to do is break bread with them. God has already given us salvation; all we have to do is touch and see.

Come closer, and save the planet. Come closer, and save your soul. **Amen.**