

A Pastor Looks at Forty
Psalm 8
NUCC Traditional
30 September 2018

*PRAY

The story is told of the young man who went to see his aging mother, stricken with Alzheimer's. She had long since lost touch with those around her. He walked in and said, "Mother, do you know who I am?" No response. A second time he asked, "Mother, do you know who I am?" No response. He asked it a third time, "Mother, do you know who I am?" And as he turned to leave she responded, "Young man, if you don't know who you are, I can't help you."

This Saturday, I will turn 40 years old. This is certainly a milestone birthday to me, but I believe it to be viewed as a milestone by society as well. I have been thinking about it a lot over the last year. I was honored two weeks ago to be named by Gulfshore Business in this year's 40 Under 40 Class. I was having drinks one night with a friend and expressed feeling a little silly about the honor that would be announced literally weeks before my 40th birthday. He smiled, slapped me on the back and said: "Well, a doctor is still a doctor, I would go with it."

I have been using a hashtag on my social media and the title of this morning's sermon is a play off of Jimmy Buffett's hit: "A Pirate Looks at Forty." While I don't claim to be a "parrot head" (the great fans of Jimmy Buffett), I do like his music. But as I delved deeper into that song written before I was born, on the B side of the record, I haven't found much material that was worth preaching on.

Buffett wrote the song about Phillip Clark, at the Chart Room where Buffett first performed after his move to Key West. The song contains the bittersweet confession of a modern-day, washed-up drug smuggler as he looks back on the first 40 years of his life, expresses lament that his preferred vocation of piracy on the high seas was long gone by the time he was born, and ponders his future. Let's just say that the only thing that resonated with me in that description was the idea of pondering my future and subsequently the church's future.

Which harkens back to the woman struggling with Alzheimer's who does not recognize her son: "Well, young man, if you don't know who you are, I can't help you." And isn't that the question that arises at every milestone birthday, or perhaps any birthday or significant moment and it's the question I raise today for all of us: **"Do you know who you are?"**

We have seen a week in our nation where people have had to ask themselves very real and perhaps painful questions about who they in light of moments that cause great division in our nation and who they are when women tell their truths.

And we have are asking ourselves about who we are as a congregation, how we disagree with one another and resolve conflict.

That is one of the reasons that I appreciate this morning's scripture reading so much. The Psalmist describes that God has created the universe and the cosmos, but amid it all, God remains undistracted and continues to see humanity as the center of it.

"When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals

that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor.”

As one commentator wrote: “Egocentric humans need not be reminded that we are the center of the universe, but we do need to be reminded that our place at the center is a surprise: ‘What is man that you are mindful of him?’”

Even when we are unable to answer the question: “Do you know who you are?” at the very least we find our grounding in a God who claims us as beloved children created in God’s image.

This past Tuesday night, at our Church Council meeting, our Board of Missions and Outreach reported that we have closed our designated giving for Hurricane Irma relief. Almost \$5,000 was granted to the Golden Gate Senior Center. I have been there personally, and seen their remarkable impact and outreach. I am also proud that our own Jim Barton chairs their Board of Directors. This grant will go to fund continued relief grants to help low-income seniors in the Golden Gate area continue to re-build a year after the hurricane.

Upon further reflection, I was struck that this church made two large grants this year to finish our \$50,000 of designated giving for Hurricane Irma relief: one to the students who lead Taste of Immokalee and one to senior citizens in Golden Gate. High School students and Senior Citizens. Intergenerational even in our mission and outreach, and mission-driven to the core. That is who you are, Naples United Church of Christ.

And who am I? I am your Senior Minister, who you called to this position after knowing me for 2 years as your Associate Minister. I am the same pastor who, when the Senior Minister Search Committee asked me during my interview: “Are you using this as a stepping stone to something else?” (I was 37 at the time), answered honestly: “Yes, I am using this job as a stepping stone to retirement.”

You see, as a preacher’s kid, growing up I moved about every five years. I have yearned to find a community where I could plant roots, buy a home, get married, have children, raise them in schools and in a church where I would be comfortable. The reality is I haven’t found a husband, no one has offered me a lifetime call agreement, and none of us knows what the future holds. But what I do know is that, as in any relationship, it took vulnerability and faith for you to call me and for me to accept that call.

This church keeps me on my toes and always looking to the next horizon. Not because we need to be bigger for the sake of being bigger, but because we need to be faithful. We need to answer the questions of where God is leading us and calling us. This is the kind of church that can always keep ministry interesting and challenging (in fun ways) as long as we remain committed to healthy dialogue and yes, at times, disagreement.

There has been a lot of conversation over the last two months about lay-led and clergy-led, but what I believe makes for the healthiest churches is when laity and clergy are in partnership together, faithfully seeking where God is calling.

While on vacation, I went to Texas, where I am from and where my family lives. My family hosted 40 people for a “40th Fajita Fiesta” at one of my favorite local restaurants two weeks ago yesterday. It was such a fun gathering of friends and extended family. The way the set-up worked, was that we were on the second floor of this restaurant. While it was not closed off, it was partitioned off from the other half of the second floor. It was clear which part of the restaurant was a part of the private party and which held typical Saturday night patrons.

After dinner had been served, there was a wonderful cake from one of my favorite bakeries. Everyone sang “Happy Birthday” and my nieces and nephews helped me blow out my forty candles. The cake was cut, and my two older nieces and nephew began to serve plates of cake to the guests. I returned to my seat and continued visiting with those around me. At one point I looked up and saw one of my nieces leaving the partitioned area with a plate of cake in her hand. Then I saw her do it again. Suddenly I saw my sister, her aunt, hop up from her seat and gently guide my niece back to her seat.

The next morning, I asked about what happened and I was told that my niece Paige had begun serving cake to the entire restaurant. You see, my nieces and nephews are being raised to see no barriers or differences. They are being raised to celebrate all people and invite everyone to the table.

And perhaps I can hope for no greater answer to the question: “Do you know who you are?”, for me and for our great church, than to say: We are people who see no need for divisions. We do not want walls to hold us back from one another and we welcome all to the table. Even when we disagree at times, we can hold that tension in

respectful ways until it is resolved. Furthermore, we are people who see no barriers to reaching out to those who not only long for, but need, a church like ours. We will do what it takes to be a church that is responsive to the needs of our community so that we may continue to grow and thrive, making a difference in our community and beyond.