

“Keep It Real”

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Daniel A. Smith
At Hancock United Church of Christ, in Lexington, MA
Sunday, June 6th, 2004 -- Confirmation and Baccalaureate Sunday*

The Lesson: Isaiah 43: 1-7

Last weekend, at the IMAX theatre at the Aquarium, I had a chance to catch one of the last showings for a while at least of “Space Station: 3D.” The film chronicled the building of the international space station with footage shot at launch pads around the world and actual video images taken by NASA astronauts who were floating some 250 miles above the planet. In one of the opening scenes, they had a camera set up a few hundred feet away from a launch pad in Kazakhstan just as a giant rocket was about to lift off and deliver the latest addition to the space station. Steam and smoke began to pour out from the base of the rocket. A voice counted down the final seconds. And suddenly, a massive, deafening, and fiery explosion barrels its way toward you in 3D. As the clouds of fire and debris came at the audience, there wasn’t a person in the theatre that didn’t flinch. Later clips show a thick white glove slowly reaching out to grab onto a bar as an astronaut in full space helmet and space suit, floats, bounces and crawls in zero gravity around the outside of the tubular space station. What blew me away the most was the fact that all of this footage was real. This was not the special effects of some Hollywood studio. These were *real* rockets. *Real* space shuttles. *Real* people just like you and me living 250 miles above the earth in a truly international community.

HYG, Hancock Youth Group, this sermon is addressed to you – to confirmands, to seniors who will be graduating later today, to everyone in between. As I was watching that movie last week, I couldn’t help but think of all of you and about what I was going to say to you this morning. This may sound a little funny, but those explosions that came barreling over us in 3D. . .they reminded me of you. I somehow had this visceral reminder of the explosive energy and power that I have witnessed in your lives. HYG, you have blown me away on many occasions! I think I made this mental connection because you are at a time in your lives right now when you too are on a kind of launch pad, counting down the years and months and weeks before its time for you to take off into your adult lives. For you seniors especially, it’s like T-minus a few weeks until lift off! I can almost see the clouds of smoke and fire starting to gather under your feet as I speak. And, as I think of you each lifting off, and starting to defy the gravity that has thus far kept you bound to your families, to your schools, and to this church, I wonder . . . what will you become? As your minister, I especially wonder whether you will lift off from your launch pads here on planet Lexington and drift off into a secular world and lose your ties to

a spiritual community like the one you've found with us at HYG. As I imagine you making your way into a future of unknowns, three words keep going through my head. "Keep it Real!" As I imagined each of you finding your poise on life's launch pad, I have been praying to myself, "Keep it Real!" Allow me to explain these three words

You already know some of what I mean. Most of you comment when you come back from your trips to Kentucky that somehow, life feels more real there, and that God seems more real for the people who are down there. I've heard a few of you say similar things about your trips to Boston for the Medicine Wheel on World AIDS Day, or maybe after a visit to Rosie's Place. In many ways, you are right. Here's why: Poverty is as Real as life gets. Inequality is as Real as life gets. Suffering is as Real as life gets. Tears are as Real as life gets. You have learned the lesson that these vulnerable places are the places where God is made real, where Christ is made real, and where hope is alive, if only out of dire necessity. If you want to keep growing as spiritual beings, I have a piece of advice that I doubt you'll hear anywhere else. HYG: Keep yourselves exposed to poverty, to inequality, to suffering and to tears, whether they be your own and that of others. Do not shelter yourselves from these things. Do not let yourselves drift away from these realities, and you will continue to know what is real in this life and that God is real in this world.

Now, having said that, bear with me. I have a little more explaining to do when it comes to this business of keeping it real. I wonder how many of you know the story of "The Velveteen Rabbit". Show of hands! Good. Well then you should remember that a good chunk of the book is a conversation between two stuffed animals. Here goes:

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?"

"Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit.

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in your joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

"I suppose *you* are real?" said the Rabbit...

"The Boy's Uncle made me Real," he said. "That was a great many years ago; but once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always."

HYG, the Rabbit's question is a question that I hope you ask every day of your life: What is REAL? What is REAL in your lives and what is REAL in the world? And the Skin Horse's answer is one that I hope you never forget. *To learn what is real is to learn over time to how to be loved and how to be accepted at any given time, just as you are. Put another way, to learn what is real to learn how to see the world through the ever loving and ever merciful eyes of God and Christ!* To put it still another way, to be made real is to hear the words of God from the prophet Isaiah that I just read, in surround sound! *"You are precious in my sight, and many splendored and I love you."* To be real is to know that you can never be ugly, except to people who don't understand.

How many of us yet to understand this? Look around you right now. Not too shabby looking of a crowd right? We don't even look outside the walls of this church to see the "unreality" that pervades our entire culture. We are a people obsessed with appearances and facades, with being "carefully kept" as the Skin Horse would say, with wearing the right clothes and the right make up, with driving the right car, having the right house and the right job. Far from keeping it real in this culture, the goal seems to be one of *keeping it together*. This misguided is what lies at the root of so much of the stress that you have experience in your lives thus far.

You have endured a ton of stress trying to keep it together, am I right? To keep it together as a high school, you have to keep the grades up, to keep the transcripts up to par, to keep yourselves on the college admissions list. You have far too many voices measuring you up and telling you what you are worth based on how well you can keep it together. Well, remember this: God could care less what college you are going to! God could care less how smart you are, how athletic you are, how rich you are, how beautiful you are! God could even care less about how much you come to church (and it seems that with today as a glaring exception, many of you have already figured this out!). The truth is that God accepts you and loves you no matter what. No matter what you have or have not done in this life, God will love you and accept and there is nothing you can do about it! This is a lesson that your time in Kentucky has taught you better than Lexington ever could. This is a lesson that I hope you have learned by the ways that this church has covenanted to welcome you no matter what. This is the lesson that we are about to celebrate as we break bread together. To know this and to believe it is to cut through whatever pretensions of our unreal world that keep us divided from each other.

Case in point: In order for me to keep it real right now, I have to tell you that in these last two weeks of my ministry at Hancock Church, I'm feeling pretty shabby. I know some of you think of me as a person who can keep it together. I'm probably more guilty than most of the pretension of keeping it together. Now though, now I have no choice but to keep it real, and to tell you that deep down, I'm an utter mess right now. . . . I'm overwhelmed with grief about leaving you all. I'm worried that I may have let some of you down. I'm overwhelmed with joy to remember all the rich and beautiful times we have shared together, at the Medicine Wheel, in

Kentucky, on the beach in Craigville, in the Upper Room. I know its time for me to go, but damn does it hurt. And it hurts because I think it's fair to say that we have grown to love each other. So, I need your help and every last bit of your prayers just to be standing here today trying to tell you all that I need to tell you and failing. I've been working on this sermon all weekend and feel like I have gotten nowhere with, probably because I'm trying to say thing now that words cannot express. I'm trying to say goodbye to those of you who have taught me better than most how to be loved, how to be accepted, how to be real, in all of my immaturity, in all of my flabbiness, in all of my shabbiness. HYG, I thank you from the depths of my heart for seeing me with eyes of God and loving me into reality, and I pray that I have been able to do the same for even a few of you.

In the end, I guess I mean something like this when I say "Keep it real!" Keep learning how to see and love the world, in all its poverty and inequality and suffering, in all of its beauty joy and promise, keep learning how to see the world with the eyes of God. What's as important, if not more important, learn how to see your own lives with the eyes of God. It's the hardest thing you'll ever do but I swear to you (as I have on many occasions) it's the most important. It's the only way to become real! Finally, remember that the church, at its best, is a place where you can always come to become and to Real with one another.

As most of you know, it's been our custom in HYG every fall to spend one of our first meetings preparing care packages to send to our college freshman. We all write little notes on construction paper and tuck them into a shoebox full of goodies. We want to be sure they know we haven't forgotten about them, that we miss them, and that we care about them. Well . . . since I won't be here to sign off on any of your notes this fall or in the coming years, I'd like to let you know what I usually write on these notes, and what I would be writing to each of you if I were here.

Dear (your name goes here):
I hope you're having a blast.
Know that you are in my prayers, that I miss you and that I love you!
Keep it Real!
Love,
Dan

Amen.