

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 1/22/06
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
In response to the death of Noah Woodley-Aitcheson

Most of you know that a week ago yesterday, a 16-year-old Ossining High School student named Noah Woodley-Aitcheson died, following a car accident here in Croton. This tragic event and its aftermath have been the focus of conversation and activity in Ossining, and in Briarcliff where I live, ever since. Because of the extensive media coverage, and because the Woodley-Aitchesons have experienced every family's worst nightmare, people all over Westchester and beyond have been dealing with their own shock and sadness.

Larry and I have known Noah's parents, Claire and Michael, since we were all members of Grace Church in Manhattan in the early eighties. Most of us who were a part of that fellowship remember it as very, very special. Maybe it was because we experienced community in a profound way. Most of us were right out of college or graduate school, trying to establish our careers in New York. Our families were far away, so we became each other's family.

Maybe that time and place was so special because we were so intentional about our journeys of faith. Although Grace was a large church, it supported a strong and extensive small group ministry. Almost all of the young adults were in one of twelve prayer groups, which met on Wednesday nights. After a 6 p.m. service of Holy Eucharist, we'd go to the deli down the street and pick up a sandwich. We'd eat together in the parish hall in the winter or on the lawn during the summer, and then join our respective prayer groups.

We'd share our stories in these groups; we'd study the Bible; we'd discuss current issues; and we'd pray for each other, for the community, and for the world. The prayer groups were a safe place where people could be honest about who they were; could articulate their own struggles with questions of faith without fear of judgment; and would be loved, even when they were not particularly liked. The preaching and teaching at Grace were extraordinary – intellectually and personally challenging – but it was really in and through the small groups that people came to know themselves and God. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I will be in their midst. We experienced the presence of Jesus in those prayer groups, and it changed our lives.

As young adults in that church, we took our faith seriously, but we also had a ton of fun. For some reason, Grace Church in those days attracted a lot of artists, musicians, and actors, and we'd support each other en masse at gallery openings, concerts, and plays. In the summer, we'd do a beach weekend, when twenty or thirty of us would take over an entire inn at Ocean Grove, New Jersey. We'd ride the waves during the day, occupy every bumper car or carousel horse at the amusement park in the evening, and dance at the Stone Pony in Asbury Park into the night.

Most of us didn't stay in Manhattan or at Grace Church for a long time. Careers took people elsewhere; people married – often each other – and when they had children, they moved to the suburbs.

Michael and Claire were dating each other when we moved away in 1985, and they married while we lived in Japan. By the time we returned to the states in 1992, Claire had finished seminary and had been ordained to the Episcopal priesthood, and they'd moved to Westchester. We had a surprise reunion when we ran into each other at what was then the Toys R Us store in the Arcadian Shopping Center in Ossining, both families now with small children.

Because our boys were a few years older than theirs, and because we were in different school districts, we didn't see that much of each other. We attended Grace Church reunions. I'd run into Claire at diocesan events, after I was ordained. Michael is a social worker at Sing Sing, so sometimes I'd see him there. Various family members would bump into each other in the grocery store or at the multiplex. By no means are we the people who have been closest to them, either recently or in the past.

And yet, they called us the night of Noah's accident, asking us to pray and to call everyone we knew to pray – especially the scattered Grace Church community. We did that, and Larry, along with others, spent the night with them at Westchester Medical Center. At the time of their deepest need, the reality of the presence of Christ manifested in the faith community that was born, nurtured, and launched at Grace Church over twenty years earlier became a crucial source of their emotional and spiritual support.

I think that that's because for us as young people at Grace Church, we learned faith as a way of life. We discovered that our faith wasn't just one piece of the puzzle of who we were and what we were about – alongside and of equal weight with our career, our health club schedule, our social calendar. The teaching, the preaching, and the very real presence of Christ experienced in the community at Grace created a crucible in which life in and with God became the core and the foundation of everything that we were about. Faith became our way of life.

For the Woodley-Aitcheson family, faith has continued to be their way of life. They've been deeply intentional, as individuals and as a family, about establishing and nurturing their life of faith, with Christ as the center and the foundation. Every morning, as her boys leave for school, Claire reminds them that they are beloved children of God. Every evening at dinner, the family reads a page in a devotional book and talks about it. The boys have attended a two-week summer camp each year that, in addition to the usual sports and wilderness adventures, is about building faith and building character. The motto of the camp is, "I'm Third," with the subtext that God is first, and others are second.

I believe that it's this intentionality about their life of faith over many years that's contributed to and strengthened the foundation upholding this family in the midst of their unspeakable loss. I believe that in the worst of all possible circumstances, when their dreams have been shattered and what they've expected and counted on is gone, the center has held because they've been in intentional relationship with God for a very long time.

Claire and Michael have been able to draw on the strength and the wisdom of God because they already know it so well. They feel God's presence and recognize God's leading now because it's already so familiar to them. They recall, with astonishment, that "somehow" they were able to do everything right that night when it became clear that Noah wouldn't live. One, and then the other of them, would take the lead as they bathed Noah as they had done when he was a newborn, and they returned him to the God who had gifted them with him sixteen years before. They lay in his hospital bed with him, as they'd cradled him between them in their bed when he was a baby, and they sang to him, and prayed for him, and gave him their blessing to let go of this precious life that they'd shared.

Claire and Michael are able to draw on the grace and the forgiveness of God now because they already know it so well; because it's so familiar to them. They've reached out to the other boys who were in the car with Noah, especially the driver, and their families. They've assured them that everyone, including themselves, has sometimes driven too fast for conditions, and that no one is to blame. Michael spoke at his son's funeral without a prepared text. He knew that whatever

words needed to be heard by the hundreds of high school students present would be given to him by the Holy Spirit, and they were. Michael said that even though Noah's life on this earth lasted just sixteen short years, it was such a privilege to be Noah's father that his overwhelming feeling was one of gratitude. And he pleaded with those kids gathered there not to take his gratitude away by becoming consumed with guilt, regret, or despair.

When tragedy strikes my family – which it will, at some time and in some way, because it does for all of us – I want to be able to draw on faith as a way of life, as the Woodley-Aitchesons have been able to do. I want the voice of God to be so familiar to me that I'll be able to hear it over the din of deep pain. I want to have so fully acknowledged the mercy and forgiveness of God in my own life that forgiveness will come easily to me. I want to so trust in the reality that nothing can separate us from the love of God, even the death of a child, that I'll be able to live, fully, even when my heart is broken and all human hope is gone.

That doesn't just happen. Such a relationship with God involves a conscious decision to turn toward God, again and again, as the giver and sustainer of life. Such a relationship with God involves a discipline of worship, of prayer, of wrestling with our sacred text, and of generosity of time and resources in the service of others, within a parish family that both supports us and challenges us.

I want my young adult sons to find a church where they can, with others in that important and impressionable season of life, experience the presence of Jesus, and in response, grow in faith as a way of life. I want St. Augustine's to be a church where we experience the presence of Jesus, and in response, grow in faith as a way of life.

May that be Noah's legacy to us and his family's witness to us - as individuals, as families, and as a parish. May we turn again toward God as the giver and sustainer of life. May we acknowledge and rest in the presence of Jesus, who is among us. May we embrace faith as a way of life. Amen.