

**Youth Sunday**  
**The House of Hope Presbyterian Church**  
**February 10, 2019**

**Elizabeth Bolsoni**

If you have never heard of biosphere 2, it is a science research facility in Arizona where biologists study our living ecosystems and their place in this universe. In one study, the scientist planted trees in a completely isolated environment to simulate farming and agriculture on the moon or planets outside of our own. To their excitement, the trees grew at a faster rate in the indoor lab than they would have naturally on earth and seemed in every aspect to be thriving...until, one by one they died and collapsed. They discovered that without wind resistance, the trees couldn't support their own weight when they had fully matured and instead just toppled. Just as much as the trees needed soil, water and sunlight for nourishment, they needed "stress wood" --which is developed with wind resistance --to support themselves. This phenomena has prompted us to reevaluate the role of stressors and challenges in our lives.

I've grown up the past 12 years in a biracial household with my parents Michael and Jennifer, my sister Nora, and a few unique cats over the years. From food, to music, and even language, I've had a beautifully diverse upbringing. It has always felt natural to be surrounded by different looking, sounding, and thinking people. My family experience and being immersed in various communities including church, school, work and sports teams has given me the ability to empathize with and hear different people. I have learned not to be threatened or offended by conflicting viewpoints or those who question and challenge me. From elementary school through confirmation, my current faith and ideas about the church have been constantly flowing as I know they will on through adulthood.

In times that our thinking is challenged by our surroundings and our communities, we become stronger. For me, it wasn't those times when I sat in the chancel and listened to David speak nodding my head in agreement even feeling self-assured, but instead, times when the sermon has challenged everything that I believe and think to be true. It wasn't the races that felt easy or that I got first place in because, to be honest, that never happened. Instead, it was the time I swam most of my 500 after my goggles and cap fell off, or the many, many, times I got last place where I became a better athlete. Of course, there are times when that resistance or wind seems to have no positive effect, for example my Ultimate Frisbee games. But in growing as humans and as a society we need to learn to embrace hardship. Fearing adversity only serves to hinder our success.

We often don't give enough credit to the people in our lives who challenge us and, in doing so, help us to succeed. Too often we label stress as the enemy when it actually helps us to become more competent and resilient.

In fact, a recent study on stress shows that only people who believed stress was bad for them died by stress related causes. If we are able to view hardship positively and realize that as the trees need wind, we need challenges I believe we may truly grow.

In growing up at the church, I have found the best of two worlds--a biosphere-like environment where I have felt safe and cared for, as well as, the wind that challenges me. In the choir school, Sofia has been that wind pushing me to believe in my abilities as a singer and as a leader. She has continued to urge us to dissolve the barriers inside of our comfort zone while always expecting the best of us. She and the rest of my choir school family have been that nurturing biosphere as a community of teachers and friends I will always value. In confirmation, Doug and Jeff were that wind, asking us to constantly reflect on our understanding of faith. On our mission trip to Detroit, we aimed to be that protective loving environment for the children we met at the youth center, while at the same time, being challenged to acknowledge that we simply do not serve others as often as we should.

I am grateful for everyone and every experience at this church that has helped me to grow by supporting me and creating this loving community. And I am even more grateful for my mentors and friends who have been my wind. The people who helped me in ways I didn't even know or realize I so needed. The people who without, I would have fallen.

## **Ian Boylan**

Hello, my name is Ian Boylan and I am a senior at Highland Park High School in St. Paul. One of my more notable roles at the House of Hope is that I am member of the choir school which I have been a part of since before I can even remember. However, today I will not be talking about my involvement in choir. Today, I will be talking about my experience on the House of Hope youth mission trips, and more specifically, the most recent one to Guatemala.

This past July, some of the House of Hope youth traveled to Zacapa, Guatemala on a mission trip. The entire mission trip was enriching and eye-opening for me. Although the trip had many highlights, I'm sure the group can agree with me when I say there was one not-so-fun part of the trip. At the end of the week, a bug traveled through the group and had us feeling rather ill. And now, I can tell this congregation with the utmost confidence that there is no fun in getting sick in a foreign country. An image that will always stick with me is of the day we were going to fly out from

Guatemala City, and Doug Snaza, our trip leader, walked out with his bags, his jaw hanging loose, and his face was a pale green.

One of the things that made this particular mission trip special to me is that my brother Eric and I served as the two translators between our mission group and the people of Guatemala. Even though there were a few other people who knew a little bit of Spanish, we are both fluent in the language. Beginning with Adams Spanish Immersion Elementary School and continuing through high school, I have had either all or part of my school classes in Spanish. As the mission trip progressed, I was able to communicate successfully and with ease with people that did not know any English. Never before had I felt so connected to a group of people with a different native language, a different culture, and a different lifestyle than I had.

One common saying that continued to come back to me during the trip was “we are more similar than we are different”. This mission trip really allowed me to experience this. From playing outside with the kids from different villages, to helping the adults with household tasks, it was easy to see there is more connecting us than there is separating us.

In Guatemala, we stayed at a local orphanage. I can clearly picture myself sitting with one of the little boys that lived at the orphanage. At first, he did want to talk to me at all. He just wanted to continue coloring but didn't seem to mind me watching. After a little while, I started asking him a few simple questions in Spanish like his name and what he was drawing. He mumbled a few responses and continued coloring. Finally after a half an hour or so of coloring in silence, he began to open up to me.

He didn't understand any English so our conversation was entirely in Spanish. Even though we were from two different countries over 1,500 miles apart, I noticed many similarities between the two of us. One thing I remember in particular was the boy was getting a little mad when he said he wanted a yellow crayon to color the sun with but they only had an orange crayon. When I was his age, I too remember becoming frustrated by little things such as the color of crayons. While he was coloring, we also talked about playing different kinds of games outside, our mutual liking of music, and we both laughed about the quizzical expressions the adults in my mission group had when they couldn't understand what we were talking about in Spanish. We may have come from different homes, different cultures, and different backgrounds, but there was more that was connecting us instead of separating us.

At a time when there is so much fear of people who are different than us, I believe that it is important to look for similarities rather than differences. It is the similarities that connect us and that bring us together. Whether it be between you and someone from across the world, or you and a neighbor, there is much more that we have in common with each other.

Today, I encourage all of you to take the time to reach out to your neighbor and to those who look different than you to find those commonalities. The world will be better for it.

Thank you. Amen.

## Lucy Minner

Good morning. My name is Lucy Minner. I am currently a senior at Highland Park Senior High School, and I am in the chaotic midst of trying to figure out my plans for next year. I cannot possibly count the hours I have spent here at the House of Hope, singing in the choir, eating bagels in the youth room, and memorizing lines and songs for the Christmas pageant. This church has been like a second home to me, and I have learned so much here. One thing that I have learned from my time at this church and have been able to spread is God's Love. The Father's Love. I'd like to read a few verses from John 15. Listen closely to the words, as it just so happens that they are the lyrics for the choir school's next anthem.

*"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Remain in my love. This is my commandment: that ye love one another, as I have loved you. God is love and those who live in love live in God and God lives in them. If you keep my commandments, and ye love one another, your joy will be complete."*

I have sang these words almost every single year for a long time now, and I think the meaning behind these words really embodies what House of Hope has taught me and how what I've learned has affected my life, inside and outside the church. God's Love is something that I think I have constantly been learning throughout my life, despite not always realizing that I was learning it. One of the earliest memories I have of learning God's Love is from Sunday School. Of course, I don't remember much of these early Sunday School days, but I do know that we learned things such as that we should always love our neighbor, and that we should treat others the way we would want to be treated....the Golden Rule. Possibly the biggest influence for me in Sunday School was Jan Snell. I remember listening to Jan read picture books to my class, and sometimes she would put on Veggie Tales for us. Those were the best days. She would teach us to love ourselves and our neighbors, and what I know now that I didn't know then is that by being taught those simple things, we were learning God's Love and were learning how to spread God's Love. I expanded what I had learned in Sunday School in confirmation class freshman year. Jeff and Doug guided us in our confirmation journeys and showed us God's Love, which we are now trying to continue to spread in return as members of the church.

Another way I have learned God's Love has been through the time I have spent at Clearwater Forest summer camp, which was first introduced to me through this church. Clearwater will always hold such a special place in my heart because of all the amazing friends I have met there, and all the memories I have made there each summer. That is the one week out of the whole year that I feel the most free, peaceful, connected to nature and God and disconnected from technology. It is at Clearwater where I learn and feel God's Love the most, besides the House of Hope. I learn and feel His love through my friends, through the upbeat morning worships and peaceful night worships, and through devotions each night with my cabin. I learn His love in my Quest group when we start off talking about a verse from the Bible, but most of the time we end up simply talking about life, and learning each other's stories. I feel His love during free time hanging out with my friends, and I'm just happy. My joy is complete. And I leave Clearwater hoping to be able to spread all of God's Love

that I had learned and absorbed that week at camp. Thanks to House of Hope, I have been able to do just that.

Through this church, I have had many opportunities to spread God's Love. The main way I spread God's Love is in the form of singing in the choir school. Choir school has been a very important part of my life for as long as I can remember, and it has always been a constant. It is something to look forward to not once, but twice a week. From being a part of choir school, I have had the opportunity to spread God's Love through music with my friends every Sunday morning worship service to an entire congregation. I have learned so much from Sofia as well as from my fellow singers, and I have done things in choir that I probably never would have gotten the opportunity to do, such as recording an album. The albums we record is another way we spread God's Love through music to everyone who buys them. In fact, when I was in Florida recently visiting my Grandparents, I got into my Grandma's car to go somewhere, and all of a sudden while we were driving I heard, very faintly, an extremely familiar song playing. It took me a second to realize that was us! That was our choir! My grandma said she always keeps our album playing on repeat in her car because it gives her peace and she loves to hear her grandchildren singing. So I at least know for a fact that our album has spread God's Love to my grandma.

I have also been able to spread God's Love to people in different places all around the United States through mission work. I have gone on three mission trips here at the House of Hope, to Chicago, New Orleans, and Detroit. In Chicago, our work varied from day to day, but the two main things we helped with when we were there was working with food shelves to feed hungry people and repairing and working in a community garden. In New Orleans, half our group re-painted a man's house that had been affected by Hurricane Katrina, and the other half repaired and helped re-paint an elementary school in a struggling neighborhood. In Detroit, we played with young children at a summer daycare that were there because the families needed somewhere for them to go during the day so they could work, and we also did some farming. It is amazing to see how impactful the work we do can be for other people, and it is very inspiring to be a part of these trips and work to help other people. These trips allow the youth here to be a part of spreading God's Love to many different places, and they are such eye-opening and wonderful opportunities.

Throughout my time here at the church, I have learned God's Love in Sunday School, the youth program, confirmation class, and at Clearwater Forest every summer. I try to spread God's Love and what I have learned through choir and the youth mission trips. I am not doing world-changing things, but I do what I can in my daily life. It is the little things that matter too, such as being there for a friend or spending time with your family. These are small but very important ways to spread God's Love to the people that matter most to you. So wherever you go and whatever you do, continue to learn and spread God's Love. Love one another. Your joy will be complete. Amen.