

Capable of Love
 Sermon by Tracy Sprowls
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 All Souls Church, New York City

With the constant news about Trump and Russia, you might not have heard that earlier this week, NASA announced the astronaut class of 2017.

This is the largest class since 2000 – and the best news is that five of the twelve candidates are women and in looking at the picture, it might be the most diverse too.

As a child, and a big *Star Trek* fan, I would lie in the grass wherever we lived and stare into the sky, dreaming about space travel and hoping to be the first woman to visit other worlds.

But Sally Ride went into space the year I graduated from high school and two years before my son was born, the first African American woman, Mae Jemison, went up on the space shuttle Endeavor.

And as a slight aside, the Lego company has just announced that five women of science and math will be made into Lego figures including these two astronauts, Katherine Johnson, who was featured in the movie *Hidden Figures*, computer scientist Margaret Hamilton, and Nancy Grace Roman, who was instrumental in making the Hubble Space Telescope.

As I matured into adulthood, I let go of the dream of space travel.

The reasons are as simple, as I was too tall, too claustrophobic and too unmotivated in math. But the reasons were complex, too.

More and more, when I looked up into the night sky I was not dreaming about spaceships and the why of the universe, but rather thinking about God, the meaning of life, and the WOW of the universe.

Once I had a child, the conversation changed once again. Many years ago, I was tucking my six-year-old child into bed. As I turned to turn off the light I said, “I love you,” but before I left the room, the small voice of my son stopped me. “Mom,” he said, “I think the universe must be a lonely place.”

What was I to say to the truth and wisdom of such a small child? Should I lie and say the universe is not lonely, now go to sleep?

I waited half a second, clearing the catch in my throat and then I turned back to the bed and sat down.

“The universe can be a lonely place,” I said. “More often than not we can find ourselves alone. But it does not have to be that way. That’s why we stay connected to our family; that is why we make friends and that is why we have a church community. Connecting to people, loving people keeps the loneliness of the universe away.”

Carl Sagan wrote in *Cosmos*:

“We are the local embodiment of a cosmos grown to self-awareness. We have begun to contemplate our origins: star stuff pondering the stars; organized assemblages of a billion billion

billion atoms considering the evolution of atoms; tracing the long journey by which, here at least, consciousness arose.”

In the developing and expanding universe, in this boundless and unlimited universe, life on this planet came into being. Whether you believe in evolution or creation or something else, the fact is that life developed on this big, blue marble of a planet.

The likelihood of this event — that life on our planet, that the water and the sun’s energy and the mutation of cells would all work together to create life — are very slim.

And yet here we are.

These two events, the creation of the universe and the unfolding, ever more conscious development of human life are intricately connected.

Not only because we are star stuff but because in looking at the stars over our heads shining in the night sky, we begin to grasp the vastness of space and the tiny speck of life we represent in the grand scheme of things.

Several years ago, I ran across an exchange between a student and her Dartmouth professor published in the *New York Times*.

Here is part of the exchange:

For his lecture course at Dartmouth last summer, “Astronomy 3: Exploring the Universe,” Prof. Yorke Brown gave a quiz at week’s end.

“Any questions?” he asked, just before one on the life cycle of stars. Just one.

Johanna Evans, an English major, wanted to know: “How do you keep from despairing at the immensity of space and the smallness of us?” She continued,

“I guess the hugeness of what we are studying finally caught up with me once we broke out of the basic principles of physics...”

“I felt as though the impact of my existence is small, compared to something like the impact of a supernova.”

DR. BROWN wrote back to Miss Evans:

Johanna, you are most certainly an infinitesimal in the cold vastness of the cosmos, and yes, you are only one of billions of humans and other creatures who have come before and will come after, and your life is barely a mathematical instant in the span of time.

But you are also, just as certainly, a miracle:

you are a creature capable of thought, of wonder, of awe. You are a creature capable of recognizing that you are not the center of the Universe.

And it is because of that very capacity that you can see in other people the same intrinsic value that you see in yourself.

You are capable of love, and so need not despair of insignificance.

See you Monday.

You are capable of love. You are capable of love and so need not despair of insignificance.

The universe is vast and infinite. We are star stuff, present at the beginning of time and still unfolding. We are capable of love.

Dick Gilbert writes, "We are, therefore, we love. Cosmic bits of mass and energy come to life together. We love, therefore, we are. May we be humble before the wonder of what we dare to create."

We each can shine; we each can give life meaning in innumerable, unimaginable ways.

We are creative and industrious creatures working, laughing and playing, always capable of love. Each of us must find our own way to express this love.

For some it will be to follow their dreams and become an astronaut.

Or an engineer. Or a teacher. Or a parent.

For others, it will be in being a good friend or good listener. And still others will express this love capacity by picking up trash on the sidewalk or building bridges between people or writing a book or running for office.

The list is as endless as the universe itself.

This is one of the reasons why this church community exists. Because the universe can be a lonely place, and here no one need be lonely.

No one need be alone. No one need despair.

Another reason we learned earlier this morning in the words about the Flower Communion.

The significance of the Flower Communion is that as no two flowers are alike, so no two people are alike, yet each has a contribution to make.

Together, the different flowers form a beautiful bouquet.

Just as the bouquet would not be what it is without the presence of each individual flower, our church community would not be what it is without each and every one of us.

We exist for other reasons too, of course. Earl Holt, the former minister of King's Chapel in Boston reminds us – he says:

"Let us be renewed in confidence that the long littleness of our life serves no small purpose, that the words and deeds of our days have meaning beyond themselves, that the highest purposes of life may be served even in the humblest of acts..."

"To know justice and live justly is to become just; to know love and so to live is to become loving."

Everything avails. Like footsteps on the sands of time all that we attempt and all that we do makes its impression.

We do not live wholly to ourselves nor do we die wholly to ourselves.

We are each part of a wholeness, part of a unity moving through time and through space, a wholeness to which we belong, bound together by the mystery of love.”

In the vastness of the universe we may feel the loneliness of our existence, of the universe bearing down upon us.

Yet we live our days in the best way we know how, bound together by our common atoms and particles of the stars, unfolding into an unknown future.

Yet, we need not despair, for we are capable of love; each of us, capable of love.

Blessed be and Amen.