

Rooted in Love

Our scripture focus today is a prayer for the Ephesians. I'll read this morning from the New International Version, modified for gender inclusivity. Let's hear these words now from Ephesians 3, verses 14-19:

¹⁴For this reason I kneel before the Creator, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. ¹⁶I pray that out of God's glorious riches, God may strengthen you with power through God's Spirit in your inner being, ¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, ¹⁹and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God."

*To know this love that surpasses all knowledge... we know something about this love here at FCC, don't we? Over the last month, we've heard the Rev. Jessica Shine share with us that God is *resolved* in claiming us as beloved. We learned how important it is for us to know that we *belong*. And we will not soon forget the spectacular Holy Spirit moments shared by our Elders, as we saw how the Holy Spirit moves through the power of love. The following Sunday, we heard the Rev. Dean Kokjer insist that we are called to "love – *no matter what!*" And last Sunday the Rev. Don Gall added another dimension in his reflection on the living saints, saying that "we are to love, *no matter who!*"*

Yes, we can say something about this love because we have known it to be true in the deepest wells of our being. *And... because we have encountered the Holy Spirit in one another.*

Today I want to ask, "How is it that our youth come to know this love?"

Or as Paul asks in Romans 10:14:

“How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”

I’ve worked with youth in some capacity for most of my adult life. I’ve been blessed to serve this church as Youth Minister, now in my fifth year in that role. I can tell you that never in all that time have I seen the levels of anxiety, stress and fear, as I have witnessed this year. It makes perfect sense. One of the greatest challenges of this time has been creating and sustaining meaningful connections with one another. In ‘Ohana Youth Groups we’ve been faithfully doing this work of connection and have seen the fruits of our labor in the ways we hold each other up. Our youth at FCC are to be commended on their resilience, their perseverance, their willingness to show up! It’s not just a few of them either. We’re seeing more than 40 youth actively participating in our youth ministry, with another 27 currently in the Our Whole Lives program... and all of this has been online and while meeting outside with masks on! There is clearly a yearning for connectedness and we are so blessed by the gifts that each of our amazing youth bring with them. And yet... I think it’s important for you to know that they are hurting. Many of you know what I’m saying. I know this because we’ve spoken through tears with one another far too often in these days.

In a recent activity, we asked the youth to draw a portrait of themselves as a planet. We then asked them to consider, “what’s in your orbit?” It was a chance to take an inventory of our mental, emotional, physical and spiritual states. We asked them to consider including other planets and celestial bodies in their system. The drawings they came up with were outstanding - we have a lot of artistic gifts in our midst.

And yet, there was a striking common theme: in many of the drawings, a prominent feature was a black hole – often representing something they had fear around, whether it be school, the pandemic, difficult friendships... a good number of these illustrations also had giant meteors or asteroid belts poised to strike their planet at any moment. It was informative of

where they find themselves today. Yes, many are back in school now. However, since everyone is wearing masks, the visual cues we used to take for granted... are simply missing!

“did they just smile at my joke?” “does she think I’m funny” “is he my friend?”

This comes at a developmental time in their lives where affirmation and belonging are especially critical to formation of self-identity and strong self-esteem!

In their drawings, our youth also included brilliant stars and beautiful planets, often representing their family and friends... *and all of you!* That was one of the joyful pieces of the exercise. Their drawings have stuck with me in recent weeks. They motivate me to reach deeper and to be ever more resolute in the grounding and rooting in love. Our youth need to know this love of which the author speaks! They need to know how **wide** and **long** and **high** and **deep** it is!

Today I bring you this message because **we are the ones** to share this love that surpasses knowledge with them. And my emphasis here is on the **WE!** If not us, then who?

Because it’s not happening out there. Youth today are bombarded with an unprecedented level of messaging. About the value of material wealth, physical beauty and success - defined by how much you have and how well you compete, how you “stack up” against your peers.

But where are they hearing the message of loving God with all your heart, soul and mind... of loving your neighbor as yourself? Where else in our culture are they shown Christ’s way of opting for and not against one another?

People often speak of youth representing the future of the church, but they are the **NOW** of the church! They are co-creators and conspirators in the divine work of the church. **We are all the light bearers!** Your voice and witness are imperative for our youth ministries; serving on our Family Life Outreach and Advocacy Team, guiding and accompanying us when we prepare

youth worships, when we go on retreats, when we engage in service projects, when we hold youth group meetings. Your energy is needed to grow and sustain roots.

Are we prepared to make that commitment? If we want faith to have relevance in the increasingly complex lives of our young people, then we will need everyone – not just parents, but also grandparents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles – all of us.

Each one of you are the way we bring the relevance of the Word into their lives. Our youth need to know that they are loved from all eternity. They need to know that their lives are of tremendous significance. They need to know without any doubt that they **BELONG** – regardless of “who” they are!

Take a moment now if you will and journey back in time with me. Maybe close your eyes if that helps you to envision, take a couple of deep breaths... Think back upon your own lives, all the way back to your childhood... begin with one of your earliest memories of knowing love in your life.... are you with me?

OK, now think about your faith journey... how did you come to know God’s love in your life? What were those pivotal moments, those turning points on your path? Were there any people besides you involved? Did you know someone older who took you under their wing? Maybe you had a teacher, a coach, a pastor, a youth group leader.... someone who came into your life and showed you love, someone who claimed you, someone who showed you that you belong, that you matter....

This remembering looks different for each of us. But how did *you* experience that love? How did *you* come to know that sense of belonging?

For our youth, these experiences of God's love often times come through you. Because this community of the church, this 'OHANA FAMILY... is not like the world out there! This is a place of counter-cultural revolution! This is a place where the first are last and the last are first!

And where else can they experience several generations of humanity in one setting? Where else will people open their hearts to them without judging, condemning, criticizing? In our prevalent culture, where the pursuits of materialism and achievement are lifted up as the highest values, how will these youth hear any other message? My friends, this church community is vital. Our youth ministries are vital.

Do we have room in our hearts for them? Regardless of what they look like or how they behave? Are we ready to love like that?

Because it matters.

Last year, one of our young men that has now gone on to college, shared in worship about the importance of FCC youth ministries in his life. He related how when he entered as a freshman, he was very much on the outside looking in. He felt uncertain and rejected by peers. But then he shared with us how he was transformed by this community. Weekly youth group meetings, the Sierra Service Project, and our people in particular, had a strong impact on his life. His roots began to grow. As a graduating senior, he had come to an entirely different place... a place of belonging, a place where he now had the courage to look around to youth on the periphery and *invite them in*. He sought to share his experience of the wide, long, high and deep love of God through the Holy Spirit. He became rooted in love.

Jesus is clear – those who approach God with the faith and humility of children will enter the kingdom of heaven. As Sarah Augustine reflects, "That humility is acknowledging that I am not separate from creation; I am a part of a web of life.... this mutual dependence is a gift. Life is a

gift.” Our choosing to follow in the ways of Jesus means that we choose our youth and we choose to share the message that Life is Gift, Rooted in Love.

Because our children stand for something. They stand for the kind of dependence and helplessness and need and insufficiency and faith that is required of adults to enter the kingdom of God. As Jesus said, “To such as these belongs the kingdom.”

I’d like to share a story about how love has the power to create and sustain roots...

We were about to make our way back to the cabin that night, after our second campfire of the week... the scents of cedar and fir mixed with smoke and lingered on the breeze...

As the coals gave off their last warmth, we prepared to extinguish the fire... that’s when he came over and asked me in a quiet, almost sheepish voice:

“Mark, can I ask you something? If there is a God, then why is my Dad always so mean to me? I don’t think there can really be a God... I mean, how could there be? Wouldn’t God do something about my Dad?”

We had a good talk that night... he asked about my own belief in God. And I shared with him my understanding that we are all loved by a power greater than either of us could ever fully comprehend.

He wasn’t convinced. He still just couldn’t wrap his mind around how a God that loves him would leave him on the streets, often with an empty stomach, let alone the other ways in which he suffered.

The week went on, and throughout that week, he was paired up with a different one of our HS youth counselors each day. Each day he was surrounded by love and held in grace, in the midst

of the old growth forest, right there along Milk Creek. Each day he learned that maybe he did matter... maybe people did like him... maybe he had something to offer the world after all.

To this day, I'm not sure when it happened. I don't know if it was during one of our focus-on circles where we share positive insights about each other, if it was while we were fishing for crawdads, if it might have been on a walk with one of our youth, or perhaps it was a cumulative experience...

What I do know is that on that final hot day of Summer Fun Camp, when we had to say goodbye at First Place Family Center and send the children back to their living situations with their families.... At the very last minute, he ran over to me, leaned into my ear and whispered, *"you know Mark, I think you're right, I think God **is** real."*

BENEDICTION:

Being rooted and established in love, may we have the power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Go now in peace with love, Amen.