

Monday, July 17

Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:1-9

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A Sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

Garry Solmonson, First member



Garry has been a member of First Nac since 2007 and teaches the Gather Sunday School class, is a VBS volunteer, and helps out behind the scenes frequently. He is married to Le'Ann, the father of two amazing adult daughters, and Pop Pops Extraordinaire.

Jesus liked stories. He uses them to teach. I like Jesus' stories because they make learning about God interesting. Part of the fun of studying the parables is figuring out what Jesus is trying to convey and how we fit into the story. In this case, Jesus explains it later in verses 18-23, but it is still fun to hear how different people interpret the scripture.

Consider how different translations of the Bible label this story. Above, the New Revised Standard Version calls this the Parable of the Sower. The New International Version also calls it the Parable of the Sower. The Common English Bible calls this the Parable of the Soils. It is important to remember that the titles, and even the verse numbers weren't in the original manuscripts. The titles represent how the people that wrote the bible translations viewed the scripture. Do you think the story is about the Sower of the seed? Is it mainly about the soil where the seeds fell? Or do you think it is about something else?

The last line is important. In the King James it says, "Whoever has ears, let them hear." What does that mean? I have ears! Sometimes it takes more than ears to understand the scripture. It takes listening for the Holy Spirit to help us understand.

Today as I study, I feel the spirit telling me that God has lots of seeds, and God is generous in spreading them. Some might see that God is reckless in the way God spreads the seed, but I see it as abundance. I also see it as an example of how I should share God's Love: generously. I should sow blessings without worrying about them running out, or to whom they are given. After all, they are God's blessings.

Reflection

Le'Ann Solmonson, First Member



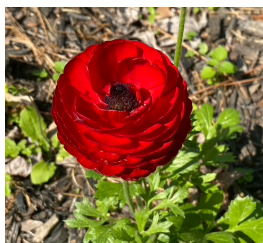
Le'Ann serves a part of the First Forward Leadership and is the leader of the Community Care Team. She has been a member of First Nac since 2007 and sings in the Praise Band. She and her husband, Garry, have two adult daughters, two grandsons, and a granddaughter arriving in August.

My garden is my happy place when everything is growing well, blooming, and producing fruit. It can be a place of frustration when I let the weeds get out of control, when the weather doesn't cooperate, or when I cannot figure out why my squash is blooming but not making squash. As I read today's scripture, I think about my successes and failures as a gardener (or a Sower). There are times that I do little more than put a plant or seed in the ground, water it, and watch it grow. There are other times that I need to do some research to determine how much light is needed or what kind of fertilizer to use to ensure the plant will be healthy and thrive. And even then, I am not always successful. I planted an entire 4' x 16' raised bed with ranunculus seeds and only two seeds sprouted and only one bloomed. While that one bloom was beautiful, was it worth the time and effort I put into that bed?

I think God calls all of us to be Sowers of God's love. Personally, there are times and places that answering that call is less challenging. If I am with someone who I know is a Christian, it is much easier for me to talk about my own faith or offer to pray for them. I know the soil is already fertile. But, if the other person is someone I do not know well or is a stranger, I may not be as comfortable talking about God. What if I offend them? What if it makes them uncomfortable? What if they associate me with some of the hurtful things Christians have done in the name of religion?

Just as in the scripture, there are going to be times my attempts to sow the seeds of God's love will fall on fertile soil, times it will sprout but not take root, and times it will fall among the thorns and be choked out. What I do know is that if I do not attempt to plant anything, it has no chance of growing. I need to be bold enough to share God's love for there to be any chance at all for it to grow and flourish in even one person. I need to not worry about the outcome and let the Holy Spirit take it from there.

By the way, I found great joy in that one beautiful red ranunculus bloom.



Prayer

Thank you, God, for the people who sowed Your seeds of love in me. Give me the boldness to share those seeds with others. Let the Holy Spirit guide me to those who need to know how much You love them. Amen.

Our Journey

To love, serve and grow in our relationship with God, TOGETHER

Tuesday, July 18

Explanation of the Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:18-26

“Hear then the parable of the Sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

He put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well.

Garry Solmonson, First Member



Garry has been a member of First Nac since 2007 and teaches the Gather Sunday School class, is a VBS volunteer, and helps out behind the scenes frequently. He is married to Le'Ann, the father of two amazing adult daughters, and Pop Pops Extraordinaire.

This is Jesus' explanation of the parable he told earlier. Some call it the parable of the Sower, others call it the parable of the soils. The explanation that Jesus offers seems to lean toward the latter as he focuses on those who heard the story and how they reacted to it. The seed, the message about the Kingdom of God, does not change. The soil, or as the explanation puts it: the heart, is the variable.

As with all parables, we are drawn to try to identify with which character is us. In this case, we all want to be the ones with the good heart, or as it is described the fertile and fruitful soil. Throughout scripture there are references to producing good fruit and a bountiful harvest. Who wouldn't want to be on the good fruit team?

Likewise, we are often tempted to identify people in our lives who represent the other soils described in the explanation, but as the apostle Paul states in Romans 3:23, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” As humans, there are times when our soil is rocky or choked with thorns. In fact, throughout a single day our lives can exhibit all the characteristics that Jesus explains here.

Our Journey

To love, serve and grow in our relationship with God, TOGETHER

Reflection

Jared Barnes, First Member



Jared Barnes is a professor of horticulture at Stephen F. Austin State University. He shares his garden Ephemera Farm in his weekly newsletter plant•ed and on monthly episodes of The Plantastic Podcast. He and his wife Karen attend First United Methodist Church where they are active in the Pairs & Spares Sunday School Class and Jared is a part of First Forward Leadership and leads the Discipleship Team

One of the delights of stewarding the Plantery, our student botanic garden on SFA's campus, is witnessing students sow seeds. What amazes me is that for some students it is the first time they've ever put a seed into soil. Something I consider commonplace is a life changing experience for them. It's a miracle that something so small like a seed can be put into the ground, spring forth into life, and then turn into a mustard plant or a mighty oak tree. And, to see the joy and the excitement of someone who has never seen those first leaves reach up out of the ground toward the sun is touching.

We like to do small experiments with students where we have them sow seeds under different conditions so that they will learn about what these embryonic plants need to successfully grow. Some seeds are put into good environments where they are watered multiple times every day, while others are kept on the drier side and only get water every three days. And, if you've gardened much in your life, you likely know what the data will show. Seeds sown into optimum conditions will germinate better and thrive.

Having gardened since I was five years old, I've always connected with the parable of the Sower. In Jesus's day and throughout much of human history, sowing seed and growing plants was a way of life, not just a hobby that was practiced on the weekends. No one in their right mind would sow seeds on a path, on rocky ground, or into thorns. But yet, Jesus likens these harsh conditions to how the word of God lands in some people's hearts.

One of the eternal hopes I have as a gardener is that as humans we can terraform to make the world better. We can change the growing conditions to make good soil. We can extend the garden into a pathway by loosening the compaction. We can add compost to the rocky soil to make it more fertile. And we can dig out the thorns—or, in east Texas's case, the dewberries—to allow plentiful sunlight to reach the soil.

We can also change hearts, ours and I believe also our neighbor's, to make them fertile ground for the word of God to grow through first principles like worshiping, studying, serving, giving, and sharing. Trying to make good soil in hearts and helping to bring about the kingdom of God doesn't mean that change has to happen overnight. Just like how it takes patience and dedication each day for plants to grow from a seedling into a flower, it takes time and effort for us to grow ourselves and help our community blossom into the body of Christ. I'm ready to help cultivate that. Are you?

Prayer

Holy God, help us be intentional about what we sow in our lives and the lives of others. Help us blossom and grow into the people and the church you are calling us to be. Amen.

Our Journey

To love, serve and grow in our relationship with God, TOGETHER

Wednesday, July 19

Esau Sells His Birthright

Genesis 25:19-34

These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Garry Solmonson, First Member



Garry has been a member of First Nac since 2007 and teaches the Gather Sunday School class, is a VBS volunteer, and helps out behind the scenes frequently. He is married to Le'Ann, the father of two amazing adult daughters, and Pop Pops Extraordinaire.

Today's reading is the continued description of the patriarchal history of Israel. It is labeled with the names of Jacob and Esau, yet the story starts with their parents: Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac prays on behalf of his wife to give them a child, and God gave them two! And while Rebekah initially wasn't the one praying to God, when the twins wrestled within her, she was the one who needed to talk to God! Perhaps it is because God says that the older child will serve the younger that Rebekah favors Jacob, the second born. Meanwhile, Isaac favors Esau, the firstborn, because he will be the one to carry on the family legacy, or so he thinks!

Jacob grabbing his brother's heel at birth is a foreshadowing of the things to come as the story fast-forwards to Jacob tricking Esau out of his birthright (and double share of inheritance) for a bowl of lentil stew. As we read this, it is easy to judge the characters. You might think Jacob dishonest for tricking his brother, and you might think Esau foolish for despising his birthright.

Nobody in this family serves as a shining example of how we should live, but it serves to open our eyes to the choices we sometimes make. Do our words and actions support the faith that

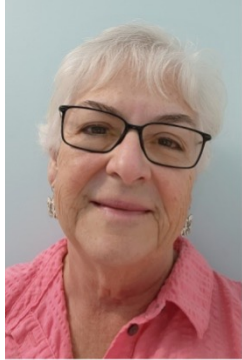
Our Journey

To love, serve and grow in our relationship with God, TOGETHER

we profess? What do we actually do-onto-others? Am I truly OK with God loving “That Person” as much as God loves me? Thankfully, grace is infinite. There is enough for all of us, and it is sufficient.

Reflection

Dawn Rigsby, First Member



Dawn Rigsby has been a member of First UMC for 20 years and has participated as a Sunday School Teacher, a Disciples Bible Study facilitator, a member of the Chancel Choir, an adult team member for UMARMY and as a Stephen Minister. Together with her husband Mike of 50 years they have 3 children and 8 grandchildren. She is retired from careers in engineering and teaching.

What a remarkable family dynamic Isaac and Rebekah had! Trickery, drama, favoritism, jealousy. The story of Esau and Jacob would make quite a soap opera. There is a lot of room for forgiveness and grace. But are we so different? In our global family, we see those same things and more. How can we possibly live together as God has intended?

A cousin of mine has four children. Needless to say there was some discord from time to time when they were young. In fact, tales are told of hair pulling and fist swinging acts that had to be broken up once in a while. But after they were grown and scattered, they set up a conference call with the parent's and all the siblings to celebrate the parent's anniversary. The call was lengthy and full of reminiscing, laughter and love. When the call was over Mom looked at Dad with tears in her eyes and says, "Oh, they like each other!" What a joy to know that even though they had their differences, they did like each other.

God must want the same thing for all his children. Don't you think he would be even happier than my cousin to have all his children "like" each other? All relationships have to be tended. They don't live without nourishment. Nourishment includes communicating well, even if from an unhappy state or true anger. It also includes treating the other person with love and respect. It includes listening as well as speaking even if we are unhappy or angry or overjoyed with a situation. If that is true of our earthly relationships, isn't it even more important with our relationship with God. He always listens, but just as in our relationships with family and friends, we have to take time to listen as well. So build your relationship by talking to God no matter what state you are in; happy, sad, angry or confused, and then be still and listen to what He has to say.

Prayer:

Dear Heavenly Father, You have known us since before we were born. You know how difficult it is for us to be accepting of others. Help us to build our relationship with you and with each other. Help us to realize that even though one is not just like us he or she is your child too and they deserve our grace and love. Thank you Lord for giving us Jesus to be our example of how to relate to people, even those not like us. Thank you for giving us your undeserved and unending love. Amen

Our Journey

To love, serve and grow in our relationship with God, TOGETHER

Thursday, July 20 Seek the Lord

Isaiah 55:6-13

Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Garry Solmonson, First Member



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Hey Isaiah, who are you calling Wicked?

In most 12-step programs, the first step is admitting. It is encouraging that today's reading is not a threatening text. It starts with mercy and plenty of pardon. It is restorative justice that Isaiah communicates, not the retributive kind that we are used to. That is because God's ways and thoughts are different, higher than ours.

In verse 11, there is reference to the "Word" of God. This should cause us to think forward to the New Testament where John tells us the Word became flesh and lived among us. Later, John says that God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Verse 11 concludes saying "the word shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

This section of Isaiah was written to those Israelites who were returning home from exile in Babylon. But it works for those of us who are still returning from pandemic or other foreign lands. The reading ends not with questions or accusations over where we have been. But instead with songs and clapping because we have returned.

Our Journey

To love, serve and grow in our relationship with God, TOGETHER

Reflection

Emily Taravella, First Member



Emily Taravella has been a member of First United Methodist since 2005. She is married to Dan Taravella, and they have two grown children, Erin and David. Emily is a counselor, and her hobbies are reading, writing, and photography. She also has two therapy dogs that she enjoys taking to nursing homes, schools, and libraries.

In May of 2020 I walked alone through the dark halls of Nacogdoches High School. I unlocked the door of my classroom, where I taught Journalism, Newspaper and Yearbook until Covid-19 shut us down for the year. The stillness was staggering. The silence was deafening. Books and personal effects remained exactly where students left them. Learning objectives were still printed on the board. Ungraded papers were still stacked on the desk. It was like a bomb had gone off that had touched nothing yet had blown up everything.

I thought of the raucous laughter, the merriment, the excitement only weeks before when we left for Spring Break ... not knowing we would never come back. The seniors' last year of school was cut short. My daughter was one of those seniors. There were no senior proms, no final band concerts, no end-of-year awards assemblies or banquets, no commencement ceremonies, no proper goodbyes – due to a pandemic the likes of which we'd never seen or even thought possible in modern times.

It felt like we were exiled.

The coming months would try us as we had never been tried. But here we are three years later, “returning home.” A vaccine was invented. Effective treatments were developed. Strains of the virus began to weaken. Although the effects of Covid-19 will be felt for a very long time, things are looking up and the worst is behind us. Most of us are no longer working remotely. Students are back face-to-face in classrooms. We are returning to restaurants and entertainment venues with increasing levels of comfort. Our creativity and innovation helped us navigate those long months of isolation, and we learned to adapt and be flexible. This was not the first time our planet has faced a pandemic, and it won't be the last. But it was unfamiliar territory, nonetheless.

Unfamiliar to us. Not unfamiliar to God.

The Scripture references God's ways, that are higher than our ways and his thoughts that are higher than our thoughts. In God's time, everything is cyclical – rain and snow; sowing and reaping; weeds and flowers. Sickness and health. We may feel estranged from God and each other in the darkest of times, but God's hand is always outstretched waiting to lead us home. I walk down the halls of Nacogdoches High School now and I sometimes recall that dark day when it felt like a bomb had gone off. I recall the feeling of loss and the fear of the unknown as the death count was continuing to rise. I had a senior at home ready to launch into a world full of uncertainty, and we all felt displaced. Now, the halls are filled with laughter again, and merriment and excitement – perhaps even songs and clapping as in today's scripture. The exile has ended.

Our Journey

To love, serve and grow in our relationship with God, TOGETHER

The pandemic was not a punishment from God. God did not send us into that exile. But God saw us through the pandemic, as God has seen people through the pandemics of the past. God's presence, mercy and grace never fail us. Even when we cannot see or feel God in the darkness we can hold tight to the knowledge and the memory of what it feels like to be in the light. Darkness and light; winter and summer; death and life; exile and return ... these cycles will repeat again and again. The most steadfast, unfailing compass that will guide us through it all is God's unfailing love, mercy and pardon.

Prayer:

Dear God, thank you for your ways. Thank you for your steadfast presence in our lives, even when we are unable to see or feel it and feel as if we have been exiled. Give us the assurance that we will never be separated from you.

Our Journey

To love, serve and grow in our relationship with God, TOGETHER

Friday, July 21 A Psalm of Praise

Psalm 65

Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion; and to you shall vows be performed,
O you who answer prayer! To you all flesh shall come.
When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions.
Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts. We shall be satisfied
with the goodness of your house, your holy temple.
By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation; you are the hope of
all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas.
By your strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might.
You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples.
Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs; you make the gateways of
the morning and the evening shout for joy.
You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you
provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it.
You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its
growth.
You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness.
The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy,
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout
and sing together for joy.

Garry Solmonson, First Member



Garry has been a member of First Nac since 2007 and teaches the Gather Sunday School class, is a VBS volunteer, and helps out behind the scenes frequently. He is married to Le'Ann, the father of two amazing adult daughters, and Pop Pops Extraordinaire.

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you offer up one of those prayers that starts with something like "God, if you get me out of this I will..."

That is where the psalmist starts today. The crisis is now past, and there is quiet reflection on how good God is. The first half of the psalm focuses on thanking God for the saving, but then the second half broadens to acknowledge how great God is in general!

Is it the crisis that makes us aware. Do we generally take God for granted and fail to offer praise and worship? Sure, we sing the Doxology: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow..." But, over time has our doxology become rote? Is there really praise in our voices?

The Psalm (song) ends with creation itself praising God. The Hills, the meadows, the valleys sing together for joy! Hopefully, reading the psalm today reminds us that we too are his creation, and we will join in singing God's praise.

Our Journey

To love, serve and grow in our relationship with God, TOGETHER

Reflection

Don Clark, First Member



Don Clark has been a faithful member of the United Methodist church since 1997. He has been married 47 years to Pat – they have 3 daughters & 2 granddaughters. He is a retired computer software developer and enjoys playing guitar and leading sing-a-longs at many places around town. He is also one of Sunday School teachers in the Roundtable Class

As I start to read Psalm 65, I hear the Psalmist singing praises to God for answered prayer. It reminds me of how God answered my prayers more than once. There was a time not too long ago when I lost my voice. I could not speak above a whisper because my right vocal cord was paralyzed. It's hard when you're not able to have a conversation or sing in the choir. I prayed that God would restore me. After 100 days of lingering in that situation, my doctor referred me to a famous voice specialist in Houston. He performed vocal cord surgery and my voice returned in one day. The way God answers prayers is as different as the people he created. God answered my prayer by guiding me to someone who used the gifts God gave him.

The psalmist goes on to describe his feelings of joy and appreciation and how thankful he was to have been placed in such a beautiful world. The world God created gives us a powerful way to understand Him and it comes when we pay attention and notice the inner workings of the Natural world. I live out in the country and I feel the presence of the Lord when I am out in the woods by myself. There are many hymns written by others who obviously feel the same way. A few of those hymns, which basically thank God for all the good lessons we can derive from Nature, are listed below:

<i>All Creatures Of Our God And King</i>	<i>p. 62 in UMH</i>
<i>For The Beauty Of The Earth</i>	<i>p. 92 in UMH</i>
<i>This Is My Father's World</i>	<i>p. 144 in UMH</i>

Prayer:

Dear God,
Thank you for the beauty of the earth,
For the glory of the skies,
For the love which from our birth
Over and around us lies.
Lord of All to Thee we raise, this our hymn of grateful praise.

Our Journey

To love, serve and grow in our relationship with God, TOGETHER

Saturday, July 22 Embrace the Grace

Romans 8:1-11

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Garry Solmonson, First Member



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When Dorothy is transported via tornado to a strange wonderful new land, she is confused as to where she is. She needs the help of Glinda the Good Witch to explain the things in the land of Oz. Such is Paul in his letter to the Romans, having to explain to us how things work in light of the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, the Christ. Foremost being the workings of the Holy Spirit.

Having come from a place where the law demanded specific actions and corresponding punishments for transgressions, Paul starts off by announcing that things work differently now. There is still sin and death, but we needn't worry about that if we but embrace the grace provided to us by Christ's spirit.

Paul gets caught up in a Flesh vs. Spirit throwdown and throughout history many a preacher have used this language to dwell on sins of sexual immorality. Many other scholars suggest Paul could have picked a better word than flesh to convey that we need to think and live differently in response to the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Personally, I like the "Embrace the Grace" idea, because like any good hug, the squeeze you get is as good, or better than the squeeze you give.

Our Journey

To love, serve and grow in our relationship with God, TOGETHER

Reflection

Elsa Jordan, First Member



Elsa Jordan has been the Director of Children's Ministries of first church for 12 years. She is married to Barry and they are the proud parents of Sophie Jordan, who dances at SFA and is studying dance movement therapy.

As Director of Children's Ministries, I am constantly processing and attempting to translate the profound depth of God's Word into lessons that children can understand and own. This does not mean simplifying, "watering down" or altering truth. This means trying to get to the core of the profound truth and relating it in a way that reveals God accurately and truthfully. It's an important and daunting task that requires lots of prayer and reflection.

When reflecting on Romans 8:1-11, my mind goes to Paul teaching us the "Tug-O-War" of our Christian faith. We are given the choice to be set free from the law of sin and death by choosing Christ and setting our minds on the things of the Spirit and not on the things of the flesh. Though we are all in a perpetual internal struggle of pulling against the desires of our flesh and the Spirit which dwells within us, we are set free through the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus.

As Christians, our free will often puts us at odds with the notion (and fact) that we are set free by the Spirit. We are constantly put in a position to choose what we desire versus what God desires for us. Paul reminds us of the grace that God bestows when we choose to abide in the Spirit and consequently, we are charged with living differently in response to this gift. We are called to put our minds on the Spirit and be transformed. It is not an easy process to learn how to follow the "tug" of the Spirit and not the "tug" of the flesh. Thankfully, the scripture teaches us we can embrace and feed the Spirit within us through worship, studying scripture, more service, more generosity, and through sharing the Spirit with others. The more we do these things, the stronger the "tug" of the Spirit within us becomes and our "Tug O' War" becomes easier.

I also like the "Embrace the Grace" concept and the illustration of a good hug. It reminds me of one of my favorite poems from childhood written by Shel Silverstein. This poem, on its face, might seem childish and rudimentary, but there is choice given in the rhyme which is as simple as choosing love, and is ultimately what Romans 8:1-11 is asking us to do.

By choosing to live in the Spirit, in love and in grace over flesh and struggle - "Tug O' War" can become a "Hug O' War".

"Hug O' War" can serve as an invitation to us all to live in grace so "everyone wins".

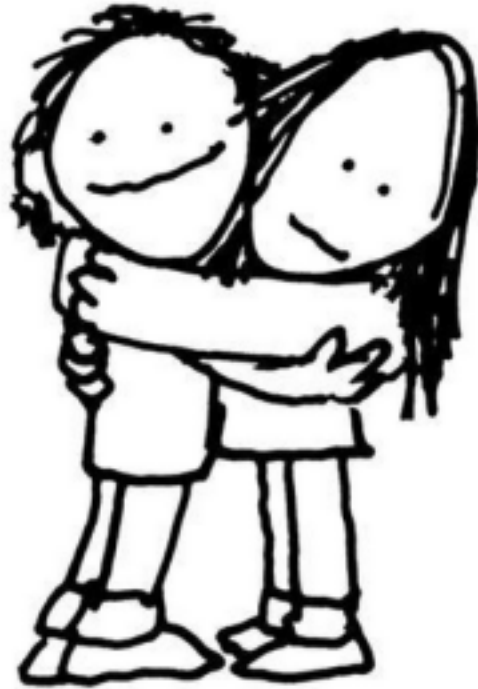
Our Journey

To love, serve and grow in our relationship with God, TOGETHER

HUG O' WAR

I will not play at tug o' war.
I'd rather play at hug o'war,
Where everyone hugs
instead of tugs,
Where everyone giggles
And rolls on the rug,
Where everyone kisses,
And everyone grins,
And everyone cuddles,
And everyone wins.

Read more poems in
Where the Sidewalk Ends
by Shel Silverstein!



Where the Sidewalk Ends © 1974, renewed 2002 Evil Eye, LLC

'Hug O' War' was published in 1974 in Silverstein's collection Where the Sidewalk Ends.

Prayer:

Life-giving God, thank you that through Jesus Christ, we have been set free— Freedom from the desires of the flesh that leads to death, freedom to follow the tug of Your Holy Spirit. Help us each day to choose You over our own selfish desires. Amen.

Our Journey

To love, serve and grow in our relationship with God, TOGETHER

Sunday, July 23

Your Word is a Lamp to My Feet

Psalm 119:105-112

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.
I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to observe your righteous ordinances.
I am severely afflicted; give me life, O LORD, according to your word.
Accept my offerings of praise, O LORD, and teach me your ordinances.
I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law.
The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts.
Your decrees are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.
I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end.



Garry Solmonson, First Member

Garry has been a member of First Nac since 2007 and teaches the Gather Sunday School class, is a VBS volunteer, and helps out behind the scenes frequently. He is married to Le'Ann, the father of two amazing adult daughters, and Pop Pops Extraordinaire.

Do you have a pet? Have you ever told your dog, or cat, or horse, or bearded dragon to “look over there” and used your hand to gesture in the direction you want the animal to look?

More often, than not, the animal will not look at what you are pointing to, but instead will look at your hand that is doing the pointing.

Today, the psalmist appropriately tells us that scripture is a tool to help us find the way. Scripture (the law) is not the way itself. Scripture is the hand that points and if we focus on the pointing hand, we will not see that to which it is pointing.

The reading mentions ordinances, precepts, and laws all of which are meant to lead us. The writer is not stationary on a path, but is moving forward, through a darkness that is illuminated by the scriptures, so much so that the psalmist can see, and avoid, the traps that have been set for him!

Oddly, as I got to the end of the reading, I found myself humming Amazing Grace:
'tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.

Our Journey

To love, serve and grow in our relationship with God, TOGETHER

Reflection

Elton Scifres, First Member



Elton has been a member of FUMC for 30 years and has served the Church in a variety of capacities. He currently serves on the Board of Stewards, is a semi regular usher, and is a member of the Gather Sunday School Class. He is a retired SFA professor and currently spends time gardening, doing photography, playing music, and visiting grandchildren.

I think I wrestle with scripture more than most, probably because of my generally cantankerous nature. Sometimes I have no idea what it is saying, which is one reason I approach this task with a good deal of trepidation. Other times I think I understand it but I don't particularly like what it is saying. Much of it is clearly open to multiple interpretations - as evidenced by literally thousands of Christian denominations around the world. It can be downright frustrating!

The Psalmist in today's reading reminds me to be grateful for God's word. The Bible may not be the beacon of clarity that I want it to be, but it is sufficient to light my daily path and deserves my full attention. I'll never get everything right, but I can "incline my heart" toward following its precepts and pray for deeper understanding.

Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for Your Word. I pray for the determination of the psalmist. I pray for greater depth in my understanding of scripture. I pray that I will have the strength and perseverance to apply the things I do understand. Most of all, I thank You for forgiving me when my determination, understanding, strength and perseverance are lacking.

Our Journey

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