

Roots and Wings

1)Roots that Nourish

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We began today a new sermon series entitled “Roots and Wings.” Over the next few weeks Ron and I will be looking at various aspects of our congregation. And we will be thinking about how our church is equipping people with a base....with roots to be firmly planted in their lives and in their relationship with God and one another.

We will be thinking about those ways our church is part of God’s work---God’s desire to give wings to people so that they can fly out into the world and meet the needs of others.

And this morning, we are going to start out by talking about one of the most precious resources we have in this world...and in this church....our Children.

Now I want to take a moment to get something out of the way early on. If you or someone you know has ever been made to feel like they are second class in society because they chose to or for a physical reason couldn’t have children that is so wrong.

This idea that Children are only a blessing to their biological parents is something that can sometimes enter into a few folks thinking...but it couldn’t be farther from the truth.

I have some met some absolutely amazing parents who never had children themselves. But they instead treated each and every child they worked with...every child that they taught...as if it were their own.

I know parents who made the choice and responded to God’s call to adopt...and are absolutely the most devoted, caring and inspiring mothers and fathers that I have ever met.

So regardless of whether you are 25 or 95...whether you have children who are gone and out of the house or you have children in Sunday School this morning...

Whether or not you have adopted children, biological children or no legal children of your own at all....you are called to be a parent...you are called to be a mentor...you are called to be an aunt or uncle to every single child in our midst.

Many of us have heard the saying “it takes a village to raise a child...” We are that village and we all can play a role in the positive development with the Children in which God has entrusted this congregation.

I found our Psalm reading particularly interesting this morning. Especially since it was attributed to Solomon. You don't come across a Psalm attributed to someone other than David too often.

And whether it was actually Solomon who wrote it or not, you can easily see why it would be attributed to him.

Because Solomon, the wise king cared greatly about sharing the wisdom he had with children....with the next generation.

The book of Proverbs, which is also attributed to Solomon...is a collection of wise sayings and advice...its actually one of my favorite books in the Bible and I often tell people who are new to or inexperienced with the church or the Bible to use the book of Proverbs and the Gospels as starting points for getting acquainted with the Biblical text.

The book of Proverbs starts out this way...and this is 19 verses so please bear with me as I share it with you, it says this:

*1-6 These are the wise sayings of Solomon,
David's son, Israel's king—
Written down so we'll know how to live well and right,*

*to understand what life means and where it's going;
 A manual for living,
 for learning what's right and just and fair;
 To teach the inexperienced the ropes
 and give our young people a grasp on reality.
 There's something here also for seasoned men and women,
 still a thing or two for the experienced to learn—
 Fresh wisdom to probe and penetrate,
 the rhymes and reasons of wise men and women.*

*⁷ Start with GOD—the first step in learning is bowing down to GOD;
 only fools thumb their noses at such wisdom and learning.*

*⁸⁻¹⁹ Pay close attention, friend, to what your father tells you;
 never forget what you learned at your mother's knee.*

There is so much I like about that first chapter. Especially the call to Start with God. What sound advice...what simple advice....yet we forget it so often in what we do. Start with God.

Yes, we will talk about caring for our children....yes, we will talk about caring for ourselves....yes we will talk about caring for the world....but we must remember to Start with God. To establish our roots in God from the beginning.

Its reminds me of that announcement you hear in the airplane safety video....please secure your own mask before assisting others....make sure to start with God before you go off to work on anything else.

Also, I love verse 5 of that first chapter of proverbs which Eugene Peterson so beautifully translated as it reminds us “There's something here also for seasoned men and women—Still a thing or two for the experienced to learn.”

If you have ever taught a Sunday school class or given a children's moment or even been sitting in church on Sunday and realized that the

Children's moment spoke to you more than the Pastor's sermon....you know that we so often find life-changing truth in the simple messages we strive to give our children.

So often we want to make the message so complicated and throw all of our fancy theological words into the mix that the core of the gospel...of the Good news can get lost.

So I would like to assert this morning that it is through our simple words, teachings, and actions in which we raise up our children of the church....that we also discover new revelations about our God.

And that is always the most amazing thing about stepping into the work of God....we always end up receiving just as much if not more than we put into it.

Today's Gospel lesson is one in which many of us are familiar: the parable of the sower.

Here we find an analogy where the seed is the word of God, the hard ground represents someone hardened by sin...where someone hears the word of God but does not understand it.

The Stony ground gives us the image of a person who professes the word of God but doesn't actually change the root of who they are....and so they wither away because of lack of depth.

The thorny ground represents someone who receives the word of God, but who surrounds themselves with things of the world such a greed, lust, power...everything that makes it so the person no longer gives time to the God—but instead is choked by those other distractions.

And of course, the good ground portrays one who hears, understands and receives the word and then allows the word to guide their life.

Whenever we experience a lesson or teaching our first reaction is to apply it to ourselves as individuals. And this parable is really asking us

to do that....But we also need to think about how it applies to us as congregation as a church.

To put it another way, this parable leads us to ask the question what kind of soil are we surrounding our children with....what kind of soil are we encouraging them to be.

During my summers while I was in college, I had the opportunity to work as a counselor at Camp Aldersgate- which is a United Methodist Camp in Eastern Ohio.

Every week we would see between 100 and 200 different kids who would come to spend 5 days away from their family—many for the first time experiencing God’s creation.

And before we even got our first group of campers for the summer, the staff was put through an intensive two week training course that taught us everything from building a camp fire, to first aid, to leading games and campfire stories.

But I have to say in all of the other training I’ve had in college and seminary and internships....nothing stuck with me like 3 simple words that I heard in that summer’s training when it comes to working with kids. Those three words were: Behavior is Purposeful.

Behavior is purposeful. In other words, when a child is acting out, or is overly shy, or is easily upset, or is unwilling to participate it isn’t because that child is being difficult on purpose. The way they are raised, the responses they have gotten from others in their lives, whether or not they are feeling safe or not at the time all help to decide how they are going to encounter the world.

And as these children’s church family, we in part, have the power to influence how they encounter the world, both now and for the rest of their lives.

What an awesome responsibility. What a serious responsibility.

This community of faith as the power to make the young people of this church to feel safe....to feel welcome...to feel support...or it has the power to reject them....to tell them to be quiet....to tell them to wait until they are older and more mature before they participate.

On the surface it is so easy for us to say “of course we welcome children, of course we want to support children and have them in our church.”

But sometimes.....saying that they are welcome isn't enough to make them feel welcome.

I once had a mentor tell me that you are not showing someone radical hospitality unless you are being so welcoming that it makes you feel out of your comfort zone.

Think about that for a minute....what does that look like.

For some...it might look like dealing with young infants crying in the narthex but even though you are having a difficult time paying attention to the sermon, you are so glad to hear that sound of the next generation.

For some it might mean that the back of your pew is getting kicked more than you would like it to...but you are thankful that mother or father made the decision to wake their kids up early, skip soccer and come to church.

For some it might mean that the conference room that your small group meets in is a little messy because the youth group had just finished having a meeting in there and they didn't clean up as well as they should of...but you are thankful to have teenagers coming to church and hearing the word of God.

Don't get me wrong: We of course want to instill respectfulness into our kids....we don't want them running amuck and destroying everything...but the reality is if we are going to be serious about

including young people in our church, sometimes things are going to be a little more messy or a little but louder than we prefer...

From time to time people ask me whether or not youth ministry is worth the investment we put into it. Is it really worth the money we pay the staff and the space we give up for there to be ministry specifically for our youth? Seriously---I have gotten that question many many times.

And my answer as always been the same.....

I always respond with a question of my own: How much is a child's life worth to you?

If you know you could save the life of just one kid in our community....prevent one person from dying how much would you give?

Because that folks....more than anything....is what our youth ministry does. It saves lives. Literally..... the church is no stranger to saying we save souls.....which I think we do some of that as well....But our church saves children's lives...

How do I know that? I know that because I have received the phone calls when someone has just taken a bottle of pills...

I have received the calls when a student's friend has been drinking so much that they have passed out and no one can tell if they are breathing or not...and they aren't sure if they should call 911. (By the way the answer that is YES).

I have had the youth who cuts themselves every night to feel something tell me that they need help.

I have the child whose parents are being emotionally or physically abuse come to my office and confide in me.

I have gotten messages from kids who are about to run away and never be seen again.

I have been the first adult to find out that the explicit tape or the explicit photo of a youth is being circulated throughout their school and they have no idea what they will do.

And These examples are not from my fire or police chaplaincy work...they aren't from my service at previous churches or camps....this is all stuff that has happened in the life of the children of this congregation.

So, is investing in our church's youth and children's ministry worth it? Absolutely it is.

Go ask any of our youth or older children about what they love about our church.

And I guarantee you once they get past the "its fun and my friends are here" answers they will all say "because I feel safe here....I can be myself here."

There is no doubt that our church is doing some amazing ministry...especially when it comes to our children and youth...but the reality is that we could be doing so much more.

I'll be honest with you....in order to sustain the growth both in numbers as well as engagement with our young people...it will require more investment on the behalf of this congregation.... Both in volunteerism and monetarily.

Our youth program is running a deficit. The engagement that Tawfick, Stephanie and I are doing with the kids is costing a lot of money.

Bringing lunch to the schools, going out for coffee with kids and their parents, going to ice cream, renting high capacity vehicles or mission trips and service trips, remodeling Lamm Hall so that they can be a nice and safe place for moms to leave their children while they engage in spiritual growth on our church campus all costs money.

We need your help...and its more than just money...because I know there are many who are giving all they can...and we appreciate that so much...but we also need volunteers.

Lock-Ins, Sunday School, retreats, mission trips, youth group....we need lots of adults to step up and help us run these things.

And I know it can feel intimidating working with children or youth but let me assure you...we have jobs for all skill levels....sometimes we just need another set of eyes making sure everyone is okay...sometimes we just need someone to help us set up dinner....sometimes we just need someone to help drive the kids to Concord or Pleasanton or to Glide in San Francisco.

Please consider helping us to keep the soil at SRVUMC deep and rich so that our young people can place firm roots in this loving community and in our loving God.

I'd like to close by sharing something that happened recently that reminded me just how blessed we are here at SRVUMC.

This week a pastor from another United Methodist Church in our annual conference....a church that has always been known as one of the flagship congregations...and church that has had vital ministries for people of all ages for the last 120 years came to meet with me...

Because their church for the first time, is looking at a near-collapse of their youth and 2nd-5th grade programming.

Hear me...a church that has multiple pastors on staff...a ginormous endowment, a beautiful campus...is struggling to get even 1 or 2 youth at youth group.....is struggling to get any 4th or 5th graders in a Sunday school class.

We need to not forget what we have here. We need to realize that when ministers and pastors and churches in our conference have questions about youth and children's ministry they look to our congregation for guidance....for answers.

Friends, we are so blessed with opportunities to make a difference in the lives of young people but be assured if we start to take that blessing for granted we could quickly lose it.

I say this not to scare us....but to wake us up to the incredible opportunity we have in our midst. May we see God's word.... And may we allow it to grow along with these children in rich soil and provide them a space to develop deep roots that nourish. Amen.