Deep and Wide

Psalm 1:1-3 Kimby Young

Ephesians 3:14-21 September 10, 2017

Proverbs 3:5- 6

Today is Rally Day. Some of you know exactly what that is – if you remember childhood Sunday School Rallies. I admit that we have made less of a big deal about Rally Day in recent years – so some of you have asked just what Rally Day is. It is simply the way we kick off a lot of church programs in the fall – especially Christian Education. It is usually the Sunday after Labor Day, today. It’s time to gear up for education for another year; time to return to Sunday School or start a new year of curriculum; time to rally back to church and get excited, time to start something new. A lot of our programs start around this time of year. I have mentioned many of those in the announcements and they are in the bulletin or in the newsletter. A lot of wonderful activities are happening here at First Presbyterian Church. It’s a great time to be here.

For me, as a life-long follower of Jesus, as a career-long Christian Educator, as the daughter of the best Bible teacher I have ever known – Rally Day is all about digging in deep – trying to grow in faith, seeking to build on my relationship with God, deciding again to follow Jesus, and to make choices that will help me be and do, what I believe God intends for me to be and do. It is going deeper and wider in our relationship with God in Jesus Christ. As I’ve said, growth in faith doesn’t just happen. You have to work at it.

The Psalm for today speaks of growing deep roots and spreading out wide branches – a tree planted by streams of living water. You can picture such a tree – full and fruitful. Stretching out, welcoming birds and sheltering animals. Imagine such a beautiful tree. You know it will grow, finding nourishment for the strong roots, digging deep and spreading out. The scripture says that’s what faith is all about, and you too can be a beautiful fruitful tree. It’s about putting yourself in the right situation to grow – surrounding yourself with positive people and good opportunities, drinking deeply of the streams of living water, soaking up the sun and the light of Christ. If we put ourselves in the right situations – God will help us grow. If our roots are strong, we will grow strong. If we are planted in the right place, we will be nourished and healthy. It’s a great image.

Both the book of Psalms and the book of Proverbs out of which two of our readings come this morning, are poetry out of the wisdom tradition of the Bible. Wisdom literature says that we can observe God by observing the world. We can learn about God by living and noticing God all around us. We can trust that God is in the world, and that God is with us, because we have experienced that presence of God in our lives. Often the writings of wisdom literature in the Bible are reminders of how to live – good advice as we try to be better people, as we try to follow God’s will. The Proverb for today says “Trust in the Lord with all of your heart.” Do not lean on your own understanding … your own strength, your **own** decisions, your own abilities. They may be there – you may be wise and capable. But God is the one who makes you so. On the other hand, you might not think you are very able – but remember God is. And God will make you able to do whatever it is you need to do. God has given you gifts and abilities. God will give you courage and opportunity. “Trust in the Lord with all of your heart.” Acknowledge God in all that you do, all that you try, all that you are. And scripture says, God will make your path straight and clear and good.

I think I needed to hear that this week. I have confessed to you before my tendency to worry. This week I was worrying about all the new programs starting and the old programs restarting, that they will be successful. I was worrying about the budget and whether we will be able to pay all our bills and do everything we want to do. I was worrying about how to attract new members, how to reach young adults, how to care for everyone who needs extra care, how to, you know, be church and encourage one another in our faithfulness. And then I heard this scripture - “Trust in the Lord with all of your heart.” “Trust in the Lord with **all** of your heart.” And God WILL make your way clear.

To me that’s what growing in faith is all about. Not gathering knowledge. Not accomplishing tasks. Not being perfect. But TRUSTING God. Learning to trust God in all our ways, in all our days. Learning to lean into God and lean on God at all times and in all circumstances. It’s easy to say, not always easy to do. Because that worry creeps back in, that fear, that reality of a messed up world, that concern for those we love, and for a world that is sometimes far from what we would hope. It’s hard. “Trust in the Lord with all of your heart.” Everything will be right.

When you need a reminder. - That’s what church is all about. That’s what this community of believers is supposed to do for each other. That’s what Christian Education and fellowship is meant to be. To remind us of God’s presence and power, God’s assurance and promise, God’s love and mercy. To remind us of our fellow travelers and of the varied gifts we share. To help us appreciate those gifts and develop them. And to invite others to come to know this great and gracious God. Our Christian community is meant to give us the tools to remember who we are in Christ, every day wherever we find ourselves. And to share that faith with others.

The last of the scripture passages for today, from Ephesians says, “For this reason, I kneel before the Father” – this is why we gather to worship. This is why we read the Bible and talk about faith. This is why we try to learn and grow. So that you know God and know God is with you. So that you know Christ is for you. So that you know there are people you can count on. So that you know you are loved and gifted. So that you know you belong – to God and with God’s people. So that you trust in the Lord with all of your heart.

The scripture says, “I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,may grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.” To know in Biblical terms is far more than intellect and accumulated information. To know God and to know God’s love – is to experience that love in profound ways. To experience God’s love with such depth, with such wideness – that your life is forever transformed. Transformed into everything God intends for you. Scripture calls it “the fullness of God.” That is the fullness of God’s love, God’s mercy, God’s promise, God’s peace, God’s hope, God’s power, God’s goodness, God’s grace. This is what Christ wants for us – fullness of God, complete experience of all that God is, absolute fulfillment of all God has created in you. Oh yes, this is a tall order – in fact it requires a lifetime of seeking, a lifetime of growing and stretching into God’s grace. You are never too old or too young to seek God, to study and learn and share and blossom – like a tree planted by living waters.

Hear this invitation of God for you – for all of us this day. Come into God’s presence and continue to grow, as Ephesians says - “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith… And that you, being rooted and established in love, may 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, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”