

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton WI

July 28, 2024

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Ephesians 3:14-21; "Rooted and Grounded in Love"

Friends, it was a week. Perhaps you know the game where you tell yourself that things will slow down in the summertime. Perhaps you've played that game. I'm an Olympic-level champion of this game, even though the game itself is unwinnable. Things do not slow down in the summertime. At least in certain chapters of life, when days are circumscribed by work and family responsibilities. But even in the midst of a full summer, this week stood out. Really, this Thursday stood out. On Thursday, several church members gathered in the sanctuary, along with a host of other family and friends, to remember and give thanks for the life of Harry Spiegelberg.

I won't rehash my whole homily, but it's worth restating for that Harry's impact on this community was remarkable. He was a devoted family man, a faithful leader in both our congregation and the greater community, and a captain of the paper industry. He lived a long and full life, and it was an honor to help lay him to rest in God's eternal care.

As soon as I got home on Thursday, I logged on to my laptop to attend another funeral that took place in Ohio. It was for a sixteen-year-old boy named Rudy, a name you might recognize from a handful of recent pastoral prayers. Rudy lived a short but full life. He died a few weeks ago from complications of a rare pediatric cancer that was first diagnosed in the summer of 2020. I grew up with his mother, Emily, and her brother John. My dad sang in the church choir with their parents; I danced in the high school show choir with Emily and studied abroad in Mexico with John. I hadn't seen Emily in years until a few summers ago, when one of her son's surgeries brought them to a hospital in Chicago. I brought her muffins from our local bakery and a few sets of legos for Rudy to tackle once he was out of recovery. Most importantly - at least for me, if not for Emily - I gave her one of those hugs that goes on forever, because you can't bring yourself to let go.

Sometimes I feel ambivalent about the language we use when we talk about cancer. It's always a *battle*, a battle one either survives or does not. But it really was a battle for Rudy and his family. Or rather, a series of battles. There were fleeting victories and dashed hopes; moments of normalcy and an endless supply of casseroles from locals and GrubHub cards from friends around the globe. The funeral was a testimony to both the unbearable tragedy of Rudy's death and the undeniable blessing of Rudy's life. A procession of stricken teenage boys in blue blazers came forward, each one recounting memories of their friend.

The most poignant moment of the service for me was when Emily did what Emily has always done best: sing, and lead others in singing. With John accompanying on

guitar, Emily taught the gathered congregation a haunting, beautiful arrangement of Leonard Cohen's song, *Hallelujah*.

Our mutual friend Jean reflected on the experience in a prose poem: "I am thankful you could have heard a pin drop. I am thankful for this line: And even though it all went wrong, I'll stand before the Lord of Song with nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah. I am thankful for harmony and the sound of a whole church singing, in front of a mother grieving her son. That we all knew to quiet and quiet some more, singing the last few lines as a hush...I am thankful that song reaches places words alone cannot touch. I am thankful for a mother who chose to teach and gather us on a day that could render her silent. I am thankful she held her hands over her heart and took in the whole sanctuary joined in their thanks and praise. I am thankful for Rudy, who lived a life bigger than his years."

I am telling you all of this in part as a confession: I very nearly gave myself permission to pull a sermon manuscript out of the proverbial barrel. I have nearly twenty years of sermons in my files, and even though I've never managed to organize them properly, if I put my mind to it, I can usually find one on any given lectionary text. With a bit of revision, they're generally preachable. But the truth is, I rarely can actually go through with this. Preaching is the gospel in context. It is the Word of God for this place, for these people. I can't promise that I'll never recycle a good paragraph here and reuse a decent interpretation there.

But on Friday, I queued up the Mile of Music playlist and headed to my garden to uproot some dandelions. I found myself perseverating on the old manuscript as I worked. It was fine, a meaningful meditation on what it means to be rooted and grounded in love. But I am not working in the same garden as I was when I penned those words. I am not singing the same songs. I am listening to a new soundtrack in a new garden - a garden teeming with Wisconsin natives and more mint than you can imagine.

I have begun the hard and holy work of burying the saints of this congregation; Harry's was the fourth funeral I've presided over in as many months. And I have witnessed a friend stand with her feet firmly planted on holy ground and teach her friends and family to praise God even when it all goes wrong, even when the hallelujah seems shattered beyond repair.

I can't rehash what the Spirit gave me three years ago, even if that means this sermon is as untamed as my backyard. I need to tell you how much it matters that Harry Spiegelberg was so rooted and grounded in love for his family and his church that his illustrious education and impressive career was an afterthought when we were planning the service. His work was meaningful and significant - worthy of lifting up - but it was distant second to his role as a husband, father, and friend. I need to tell you that when cancer ravages a tight knit community by attacking a child's liver, you never understand

why, but at the same time you witness firsthand the power of the Spirit granting inner strength. You see the hands and feet of Christ at work - caring, cooking, healing, singing, weeping, hugging.

In times of grief and seasons of gratitude, in hours of gardening and moments of prayer, it is entirely possible to embody an Ephesian spirituality. It is possible to perceive Christ residing in your heart, to experience an intimacy with God that makes it absurd to ignore that there is more to this life than can be seen. It is possible to comprehend with all the saints the breadth and depth and height and length of Christ's love. It is a love that surpasses knowledge and yet it is a love that can be known. This is all possible because the power of Christ is at work in us. We can accomplish more than we can imagine, and we can endure more than we can imagine.

I know I'm not the only one who had a week with a capital W, though I don't know all the reasons your hearts might be happy or heavy. I'll admit that it's hard, as a presiding pastor, to not yet know the dear souls I'm commending to God's eternal care. It's hard as a preacher to not yet be able to look out into the pews and know dozens of your stories by heart. But I can and do pray for you - bowing before the Father and echoing this glorious prayer.

I am especially fond of the Message translation of the text, so I invite you to hear part of the scripture again, and imagine these words being prayed over you, specifically and personally - for that is precisely what is happening.

*"I ask God to strengthen you by his Spirit—not a brute strength but a glorious inner strength—that Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And I ask him that with both feet planted firmly on love, you'll be able to take in with all followers of Jesus the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God."*

May this be so today, and may this continue to be ever more so as we grow ever more deeply rooted and grounded in the love of Christ, as we live these impossibly yet wondrously full lives, together. Amen.