

“Rooted and Grounded in Love”  
Sermon by Rev. David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
March 18, 2018  
Scripture: Ephesians 3:14 – 4:6

"There are only two lasting bequests," Hodding Carter once wrote, "that we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots; the other, wings."<sup>1</sup>

Roots of stability and values and trust and love. Wings with which the young can explore and see and experience. Both are necessary to growing into the people God is calling us to be.

In this beautiful passage from the letter to the Ephesians, the writer takes on this parental task and assigns it first and foremost to God. God as a loving parent. God who can imagine what is best for us, rooting us deep in good soil.

This word grounded is probably worth a moment or two. Parents also need to set limits to keep children safe and healthy. Limits that are age-appropriate, grounded in love. Limits and boundaries that will be tested, and broken. In this passage, rooted and grounded are meant as synonyms. But grounded can have a different connotation. For there is a time, usually in those teenage years, when you sure don't want to hear the words, "you are grounded." All the worse when it is accompanied by the concluding words, "young man." Decades later, I will tell you, it feels pretty good if someone says "young man." And better yet, "Young man, you seem pretty grounded." Rooted and grounded in love. That is what this letter to the Ephesians prays we might be.

To be rooted and grounded in love allows for individuality to emerge. And that is part of the task of parenting - to ground children in unconditional love and then to see what kind of kid emerges from that ground. It is a little like planting, but having only the roughest idea of what kinds of seeds are in the plain packet. Along the way, you figure out how much sun and how much shade, how much water, how often, and then gradually, you watch this unique plant emerge from the soil. Like snowflakes, no two people are exactly alike.

Here at Central, we are in an intentional time of clarifying and articulating who we are. Examining our core values, in a way that describes who we are and who we want to be to ourselves, to visitors and potential members. Like people, there are lots and lots of churches, and perhaps, like snowflakes, no two are exactly alike. So like parents of children, we want to be rooted in deep good soil and then watch ourselves become unique, loved, and needed.

So we have been thinking about the values, the ways we are rooted as a particular congregation in a particular place and for a particular time. It is both important to acknowledge that our time now, here in 2018, is different than other times in the past or in the future, but these are not new ideas of grounding values, either.

We are in the city for good. There are two different aspects of that short sentence. We exist to do good in the city. To be helpful. To be of support and assistance in this particular place. We don't long to be somewhere else. We are not trying to be the best suburban church, or to act like we are down in the Bible Belt, or elsewhere in Minnesota, but right here in the Capitol City. And so we need to think about what this city needs in a church like ours. We want to reflect on the question of "What are people here in the city looking for in a church?"

The second aspect of that core value of our identity, to be in the city for good, is to have a durability, a permanence. Not to be subject to the latest whims and fads, but for good.

A second core value we are trying to express is that we choose welcome. We were proud to say that, especially and even, one year ago today. When travel bans from Muslim countries were in the news, we continued and in fact escalated our efforts as we co-sponsored a refugee family, which turned out to be the Ahmady family. That was and continues to be a marvelous adventure for this congregation, a great learning experience, and a way to put our faith into action. But we hope this value gets lived out not just in big international efforts, but also in small groups. In the way that the choir interacts and in Bible study discussions and on mission projects. We choose welcome and delight in diversity.

Another value we are trying to articulate gets put in a few different ways. Some say that we are gritty. Willing to roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty. Some say that we are not flashy. We are not about using the newest technology for technology's sake. (Next slide, please.) We want to be more about substance than about appearance.

We've done an exercise with the staff, and with the session, that asks us to use our creative side to help get at who we are together, and who we want to be together.

If this church was a vehicle, what kind of vehicle would we be? And why do you think that? I'm genuinely curious. I'm told that the Minnesota Wild hockey team asked superfans this same question recently, and gave ten or so options for responses. We have been asking this as an open-ended question.

I've loved hearing the answers that people have provided. And they do say a lot about how this church exists and how we imagine ourselves. Here are a few we have heard.

One person said that "Central is like an old VW van. It shows that it is from a different era, but it can hold a lot of people and it can go a lot of places and people look at it and think, 'That is pretty cool!' But it is expensive to maintain."

A couple of other people suggested that Central is like an old Rolls Royce. Again, from a different era, but classy. And the bones are good, even if the paint is fading and there are some dents and it has spent some Minnesota winters outside.

Another person compared Central to the Tesla that was strapped on to a rocket heading to Mars. Playing David Bowie and with a message stamped onto the dashboard that says, "Don't panic." Exploring new dimensions, heading into the unknown.

We recently announced that we received a large financial gift. And this gift will help us live into the future with confidence and new possibilities. So then a second question becomes, if we could afford it, what kind of vehicle would we want it to be? Would we head right into the dealer and trade in for something else? Would we take it to the mechanic and ask for a tune-up that will keep us running for another 100,000 miles? Buy a second vehicle?

It's kind of a silly set of questions designed to get us to think, and to listen to others. And to appreciate the creativity that others here have. But it also gets us to speak about the values we hold dear, the image we have of this church, the hopes and dreams of what we think God is calling us to do and be.

To be rooted and grounded in values that inform who we are as a church, and where we are going and how we will get there. For a church those values better sound a lot like love. And we can express those values through our programs. Through our budgeting decisions. But also our interactions within this community. That our lives are a testament to, testimony about, the God who calls us into being. So this passage about being rooted and grounded in love, leads into another inspiring paragraph about how this love is to be expressed. In it the writer of Ephesians begs those who would listen, those who would read the words on the page, begs us

to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:1-3).

Whenever I hear or read this passage, I think of Rodger Nishioka. He was my doctoral advisor, and a guru in youth ministry. He's now on staff at Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, Kansas, and we just found out this week that they may be sending a group of middle school youth to Saint Paul this summer and staying at Central while they embark upon mission projects. Years ago, Rodger wrote a little devotional book for youth ministry leaders titled "Rooted in Love." And I want to close by reading his meditation on this passage from Ephesians. It's aimed at youth, and people who work with youth in a church setting. But it could be aimed at people of all ages.

There are so many pressures facing young people these days. Chief among these pressures, I am convinced, is the pressure to succeed. Some call this the pressure of performance. More and more, young people are getting the message that they are loved only as much as they perform. That's an awful message to carry throughout your life. If you truly believe that you are only loved as much as you perform, there can be no letting up, no room for grace.

I cringe when I go into one of our church buildings and see a youth bulletin board displaying only articles of young people who scored high on their SATs or won a track

meet or starred in a drama or whatever. The message we are sending to our young people is that the church values you only as much as you perform, which from there is a small step to thinking that God must only love us as much as we perform.

Instead, we have to deliver to young people the consistent message that "you are loved just because you are, not because of what you do." Certainly we still ask young people to do certain things and we require certain behaviors, but we must be careful not to tie these behaviors and expectations to the message of love and acceptance.

At different times, then, I hope adults send consistent messages of love to young people. I was leaving worship one Sunday morning talking with Paul. Paul is a tall, popular ninth grader from a great family. He always gives me energy and seems upbeat and positive. I put my arm around his shoulder and said, "You know I love you, don't you. Just for you . . . we all love you." Paul stopped and looked down. When he looked up, tears had begun to stream down his face. I was startled. "What is it?" I asked. "Oh, nothing," he said. "It's just that it's been a tough week and I guess I needed to hear that. Thanks." We agreed that we'd talk later in the week.

We just do not know. We don't know what is happening in the lives of young people. We don't know what messages they are receiving, what issues they're struggling with. But we do know that we are called to love them unconditionally and to tell them so at every opportunity . . . so that they may be rooted and grounded in the love of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

May it be so here. For young and for old, and all in between. Now and always, Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Hodding Carter, Where Main Street Meets the River (Rhinehart, 1953).

<sup>2</sup> Rodger Nishioka, Rooted in Love: 52 Meditations and Stories for Youth Ministry Leaders (Louisville, Kentucky; Bridge Resources, 1997) 1-2.