

## The Gifts of Relationship

Psalm 51, John 12:20-26

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Fifth Sunday of Lent

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Sometimes the essence of our faith can be captured in an image. Like the famous Rembrandt painting of the Prodigal Son, where the son kneels into the open embrace of his father. Or Michelangelo's hand of God on the Sistine Chapel, where the finger of God reaches forth to touch the finger of Adam. Or, like the images this week on the front pages of the Star-Tribune, where people lined up side by side, shoulder to shoulder, neighbor to neighbor, even stranger to stranger, as together they handed sandbags down the line, shoring up whatever protection they could from the rising waters of the Red River.

What these images capture is one of the fundamental messages of our faith:  
that we are not meant to go through this life alone.

We are from our very inception, from our very conception, born into a world of relationship, first and foremost with God, like the finger of God reaching toward Adam, but also into relationship with one another, like the people hoisting sandbags to stop the water.

It is these two relationships – with God, with one another – that can give us solid ground when the waters threaten to overtake us. And, as we have been examining this Lent about how our faith helps us cope in times of fear and uncertainty, it is to these two relationships that we can turn when we face fear and uncertainty in our own lives.

That is what we hear in our texts this morning, and it is what we have just celebrated in the sacrament of baptism.

It is our psalmist who first speaks eloquently of this deep relationship with God. Pouring out his heart to the Holy One, he cries, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your love. Wash me. Purge me. Create in me a clean heart."

The psalmist is deeply aware of his own shortcomings, deeply aware of the hurts and sin and wrongdoing in his own life. And yet, even in the midst of it, this psalmist knows it is still God who knows him best. It is God who knows his inward being, God who knows the secrets of his heart. So he turns to God as the one who can transform his life, and cries out "Put a new and right spirit in me. Restore to me my joy."

Now I know we don't spend a lot of time here at First Church talking about sin or wrongdoing, but I imagine all of us have had times when we know we have fallen short in one way or another.

Are the feelings or the cries of the psalmist anything that you have ever felt? Those pits in our stomachs, when we are aware of our own wrongdoing, when we know we have hurt someone or ourselves deeply, when there is something in our life that makes us feel so isolated because we are convinced no one could possibly understand, or accept, or forgive us?

What this psalm reminds us is that even in the midst of such wrongdoing or isolation or pain, God is still there. God's love for us runs deeper than we could ever know, and God's presence to us is as reliable as the air we breathe.

This is what we have just affirmed this morning for Rosie in her baptism.

Rosie is beloved of God. She has been held in God's care since her conception, and in the sprinkling of the water and the sign of the cross on her head, we are merely symbolizing for ourselves what God has already done by loving her and giving her life.

God knows, even now, Rosie's inward being. God knows, even now, the secrets of Rosie's heart. God knows the potential of who she is and who she will become. No matter what she faces in her life—whatever good things and great joys happen in her life, whatever wrongdoing or pain she experiences, whatever doubts and fears and uncertainties she faces ahead—there is nothing she can do to escape God's love, God's mercy, and God's presence with her.

Rosie is not meant to go at this life alone. And neither are we. And so we thank God that God is with her, and that God is with us.

But there is another relationship that we celebrate today, another relationship that holds us up in the face of fear and uncertainty, another relationship evident in our texts and in baptism, and that is our relationship with one another.

Jesus, in the story we hear this morning, tells a story of his own. In talking of his own impending death he says, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit."

We know that out of Jesus' life rose the rich community of the disciples, that the single grain of Jesus' life and ministry gave way to the golden field of the early church. And what we claim at First Church, what we celebrate in baptism, is that our lives aren't just ours, and aren't just God's, but belong to the community as well.

In our baptism, we give up—or our parents give up for us—our claims, our rights, our desires to go through life by ourselves, and we purposely place ourselves in the context of a community.

We take our thread and weave it into a larger tapestry. We take our individual position in the line of sandbagging neighbors. We decide that while we could go through life safeguarding just our own house or just our own well-being, life becomes a lot richer when we pitch in to help others and let others help us.

That's what Pam and Erik have done this morning. They have widened the circle around Rosie. They have given Rosie a field in which to grow.

Whatever fruit is wrapped up in that precious single grain of her one-and-a-half-year-old life is no longer just for her, or just for her family. Rosie's gifts will now come to all of us, and our gifts to her.

Now, I suspect Rosie has no idea what happened to her this morning. She has no clue that we have dedicated her back to God, or pledged to support her and her parents, or surrounded her by a faith community. But that's fine, because it will be our story to tell her and our story to embody for her.

It will be Pam and Erik, and Cynthia and Russ and Sheila, who will pick Rosie up when she falls off her bike and skins her knee, and who will embody God's love as they hold her in the midst of her pain.

It will likely be you, the teachers in these classrooms, who will give her a snack and a hug, who will teach her the songs and stories about Noah and Moses and Jesus, and who help her make meaning out of her own life by helping her place her own story in the midst of God's larger story.

And it will be Ing-Mari and Dennis, Ann and Jeff, who will receive Rosie's angst-ridden phone calls in 14 years, asking for advice about dating or life or how to deal with her parents, and they will be the ones who reassure her and encourage her, and live out God's supportive presence.

And it will be all of us, over the next days and months and years, who greet her with a smile, who call her by name, who ask about her life, who will help her know that she is loved and nurtured and cared for deeply.

We will live out God's love and presence for her, and the hope is that in so doing, when she does face her own fears and uncertainties, she will know that this is a safe place to come and that we are a community who will stand by her.

What we affirm for Rosie this morning, we also affirm for ourselves:  
we are not meant to go through this life alone.

In our baptism, in our presence with one another, we, too, receive the gift of relationship with God and with one another.

Like the psalmist, we, too, have a God who is steadfast and faithful, who knows our inward being, and to whom we can turn in our moments of doubt and fear and uncertainty. And like the Jesus, we have a community in which to bear our fruit, where we can share our gifts, where we can laugh and cry and pray and support one another.

And so in this season, in this time in our lives, in our moments of fear and uncertainty, when we stand at the banks and watch the rivers rise, let us also remember our waters of baptism.

We are not in this alone. We have God, and we have one another. And may that shore us up, no matter what storms come our way.

Amen.