

Rev. Dr. Laura Miller-Purrenhage
FCUCC
October 24, 2021

Rooted in Love

Will you please prayer with me: Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be faithful and pleasing unto you, for you are our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Every two years, the United Church of Christ holds a synod, or a giant conference, of all of our churches and affiliate churches. This year's virtual conference theme was "Rooted in Love," and it used the verses of today's Psalm as its scriptural base. The idea, explained UCC leaders, is that the church, like these trees planted by streams of water, is deeply, powerfully rooted in love and these roots will sustain us even in the midst of turbulent times.

The UCC then recommended that the theme for stewardship season also be "rooted in love," and, after reading the blog I mentioned in Fresh Perspectives, I can see why. This image of a tree with roots drinking deeply from the water of life gives us the idea that we, too, can share the gifts we receive through our roots with our church and our community. Our church, like the trees in a forest, are part of a complex system and when we pull up enough water to feed and sustain ourselves, those gifts then overflow into the community and can be shared with others.

So we are asked to consider these questions: What are our individual and collective gifts? Why does the church matter? How

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has this church blessed you and how has it blessed this community?

If we think about these questions, meditate on our answers we may find ourselves wanting to give more to this church, which so deeply blesses this congregation and this town. Giving is a broad term. Some of us have money and can raise our pledges. Some of us have time, and can serve on teams and boards, or volunteer for single events. Some of us have talent and can sing, help out with video and sound technology, arrange flowers for the altar, beautify the parlor and lounge, or plan for special church events. Others of us are at a point in our lives when we cannot do any of those things, but we can still pray. And so they can dedicate a little time out of every week to pray for those in our community who are in need or simply rest in God's presence, sharing themselves with God.

So in response to the UCC's request that we share something of why this church matters, I thought I would re-tell my own story. I told this story to the church in the summer after I was called here, but the summer tends to be a time when fewer people can attend worship and we didn't have on-line services then. I was asked by some folks to share the story again, when we had higher attendance.

Rooted in Love

- In 1999, was in graduate school, had just had my second child, was about ready to start writing my dissertation and was exhausted.
- Was visiting my parents and went to church there, pastor gave a sermon about calling
- We are all called to serve God in some way—some as pastors, but most in other ways
- What is your call? –My response
 - I had a lot of excuses: didn't think I could speak publicly or teach, didn't think I was a good enough person, didn't think I could handle pastoral care
- Finished diss, got PhD...a couple of my excuses had fallen away—I can speak publicly and teach! Asked God, so what am I supposed to do?
- Got job, became more involved in my church...realized pastors aren't perfect. Lost that excuse. Asked God, what I am supposed to do?
- But I liked my job and changing careers is hard. And I still had my concern...can I really do pastoral care? I noticed that students came to me all the time to talk about life stuff—hard life stuff (like when a brother was killed in a car accident, or a student had suicidal thoughts, or family life was just too overwhelming). But I often felt inadequate with my response.

Rooted in Love

And, in my heart of hearts, I wondered how they could survive such suffering. So I stayed.

- Then I got sick...desperately, unbelievably sick from an unknown something that doctors couldn't figure out
- Tests showed my frontal lobe was damaged, but we didn't know why
- Couldn't drive or read for more than 20 minutes a day; couldn't stand for more than 15 minutes; couldn't take care of my kids or myself.
- Spent most of the day lying in bed, in between getting up and doing everything I could possibly do before needing to lie back down
- Which is why I say and know that sometimes, the only gift we can give, is a gift of sharing ourselves with God
- In the midst of this, I re-read passages from Job. In fact, I re-read the passage we read for last week and meditated on it over and over
- Why is there suffering? Why isn't God healing me? How does anyone cope with this? But this time, this time my prayers had a different response than they did when I prayed for my nephew:
- Church—pastor preaching about, I don't know what
- I suddenly understood how people can handle suffering: God shows up and strengthens them. God doesn't necessarily take

Rooted in Love

the problems away, but God provides what we need. I could provide pastoral care and do so with empathy, but also with hope.

- And then I had a vision
- I could barely sit up for a 1 hour worship service, could not think well or clearly enough to study anything, but I promised God on the spot that I would become a pastor.
- And, in about 6 months, I was able to go to the Mayo Clinic, find out the cause of my condition—which turned out to be easily treated, and then start getting cognitive rehabilitation and PT to regain what I had lost.
- The therapy was working wonders so that, within 6 weeks, I was already gaining back most of what I had lost, so I talked to my pastor about my call and she recommended a seminary here in Michigan. I was just looking into it,
- But then, I had a relapse. It took a little while before doctors figured out the right combination of medications and diet so that that wouldn't happen again, and I am in very good shape now. But at the time, it was incredibly scary.
- Most of you know the next part of this story, but since this is where this particular congregation comes in, I will finish this part of my call story

Rooted in Love

And so there I was, having decided to embark into the unknown of a new career, but suddenly just as sick as I had been before. I couldn't help but doubt my call. Perhaps, I thought, God just wanted me to think about ministry or to find a way to minister in a non-pastoral way? Perhaps I didn't really have the gifts for ministry, anyway, and I had simply misunderstood my call. The uncertainty of it all was overwhelming and I felt like giving up.

As I was struggling with this call and my health, today's scripture passage just popped into my head. I hadn't read it or seen it anywhere recently. It just kind of came from nowhere. "Do not be anxious," says Jesus in that passage, about the future. Just trust in God, who cares for the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. That same God will care for you. That same God will not leave you alone, like a sheep lost in the fields. God will come for you and it will be okay.

I kept thinking this. I even posted on my Facebook page, "I am a lily of the field," trying to stay positive and feel comforted. And then, one day, my pastor invited me to the ordination of Ruth Fitzgerald, which was to take place here, in this church. I had been in contact with Ruth through email because she had attended the same seminary I had wanted to attend. I wasn't sure I was feeling well enough to go and I really wasn't certain that I would even go to seminary after all. But, that morning, 3 different people all asked me to attend, so it seemed like maybe a sign.

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I still remember sitting in the parking lot here, thinking that I might just drive away. I was exhausted and worried, and I didn't think I wanted to be in a sanctuary full of people I didn't know. But I came in and picked up a bulletin and sat in the back. Then I looked down at my bulletin and saw an image of a lily and the words, "Think of the lilies of the field."

The service was devoted to this passage, and the pastor, who became one of my favorite professors at seminary, preached. Although I could tell that his sermon was written for Ruth and that it had a special meaning for her, it also spoke to me. No matter what happens, no matter how difficult it is to follow your call, he said, do not be anxious about what will happen next. Do God's will and the rest will fall into place.

To me, this was a miracle the likes of which I had never seen before and rarely seen since then. To have had that passage from scripture just pop into my head weeks before and guide me for weeks, and then to hear the exact sermon that I needed to hear, one based on that exact verse—it was as if God had shown up, literally shown up to tell me that I was, indeed, on the right path. Again, I didn't understand how it was possible, but my understanding wasn't what was needed. All that was needed was my agreement. And, as you can see, it did all work out.

So what does this church mean to me? God planted a seed, a call to ministry in me. It was watered by that church in Kalamazoo,

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encouraged and fertilized by my home church in East Lansing, and you, this congregation brought it to full fruition. That moment in this church, in your church, was a turning point in my faith—a moment when I understood God in a way that I had never understood God before.

I wonder if you remember that service and that bulletin? How many of you helped with that service, with decorations, with music and technology, with liturgy, with ushering and greeting? How many of you supported Ruth in her journey to ministry by serving on boards & teams, through prayer, or by providing a listening ear? Could you have any idea at all that, as you were doing that work, that you were supporting me in my own journey to ministry?

God is at work in you in ways that you do not know, using you to touch the lives of people you may have never met and may never meet. So do not be anxious about today or tomorrow. God has already clothed you in garments of hope, healing, and love. So seek to do God's will, beloved, living into God's Kin-dom by sharing your gifts with the church. Thank you, all. Amen.