

This Sermon Delivered By
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Roswell Presbyterian Church
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“The Gospel of Fruits and Vegetables”
II Kings 4:38-41; John 15:1-17

Several years ago right after we had moved to Roswell, my parents came to visit us from their home in Tennessee. Among other things they brought with them, was a big clump of hosta plants for us to add someplace in our yard.

Now my neighbors know this, but the rest of you need to know I’m not much of a gardener. I once told one of my neighbors that I keep my yard looking the way it does just so it would make his yard look that much better.

So when my parents brought this clump of plants, not surprisingly, I just put them on the back patio and left them there for several months. In fact, they sat there until right before my parents were coming to see us a second time. I couldn’t have them show up and find the plants still sitting on the patio, so right before they came I had Daniel throw this big clump of hosta out into the woods behind our house.

By this point, of course, the hosta was all dried up and yellow. No one would have considered planting them now. Anyway, they were gone, out in the woods. My parents never mentioned them. Knowing my gardening skills they probably knew what I had done.

The story would end there, except that the next spring, we were sitting at the kitchen table and I happened to notice down in the woods this big green leafy plant that was growing like wildfire. Turns out it was that hosta. All we had done was throw it out in the woods, and now it had taken off.

All it needed was a source of nutrients. Sitting there on my patio, it shriveled up and turned yellow. But out in the woods, where the roots could find rich soil, the plant was able to flourish. In fact, I was so inspired by it, I went out, dug it up, took my axe and cut it into pieces, planted those pieces around in different places, and I had hosta plants all over the place.

All it took was a place for the roots to take hold, the plant took off.

Today during our 11:15 worship, our 2007 Confirmation Class is going to stand before us to be welcomed into the church. And to each of them, and in fact, to each of us, I have just one basic hope for you. I want you to find that place where the roots of your life can take hold so that, just like that hosta plant, you also can take off and flourish, and be the person you were made to be.

I want the roots of your life to take hold. Let’s talk about how that happens, and to guide us, we’re going to look at a passage from the gospel of John, the fifteenth chapter. Listen now to the Word of our Lord.

-- Read John 15:1-11 --

Every time I baptize a little baby, I always end the baptism by talking to the baby and saying, "We look forward to the day when you will stand before us on your own, and claim for yourself the promise of God's love that we have claimed for you today."

By the way, one time, a woman stopped me after church and said, "I don't understand why you talk to that baby. They can't understand you." It was in a different church, you understand. Not this one! What I wanted to say was, "I'm talking to you, lady." But I was much more pastoral than that and gave her some bland response.

But today is that day for these students. Today is the day to claim the fact that God in the person of Jesus Christ loves you. In fact, God loves you enough that he sent his son all the way to a cross for you. It's not just something your parents believe or your Sunday School teachers believe. Today is a day for you to say I know God loves me.

But so what? What difference does that mean? How am I a different person because I know that God loves me?

Let me share with you, quickly, a few of the ways I am different because I know God loves me.

Because God loves me, I know that I am a person of value, just the way I am. This is going to be hard for some of you to believe, but I was never much of an athlete when I was in high school. I know those of you who have seen me glide gracefully along while I'm jogging in the park have always assumed that I was naturally athletic.

Sometimes when you are a not very athletic boy in high school, it can be easy to think that you aren't all that important. We live in a culture that seems to say that athletes and entertainers are the people who are of greatest value. Just look at the salaries we pay them. And I wasn't either one.

But confirmands, and really all of us, I want you to hear this. It doesn't matter what your test scores may say or how fast or slow you are or what shape your body may or may not be in. It doesn't matter how much money is in your bank account or what kind of car you drive or whether or not you have the latest label on your clothes. The God of the Universe says I love you just the way you are. Fat, skinny, tall, short, fast, slow, rich, poor, hold your head high. You are of eternal value, worthy of dignity and respect.

But there is more. Because God loves me, I know that I am never alone.

Most of you know that I include in almost every benediction the reminder that God is with us "every step of the way." I find great comfort in knowing that I'm never alone, but that the God who made this amazing world is always with me.

It's great to have friends to hang out with. We all like to have friends. And even though sometimes when we're in eighth grade our parents drive us crazy, it's great to know that we have a family which loves and cares for us.

But there are those times in life when no one else can be there with us. There are those times in life when we have to face problems and issues and nobody can face them for us. Don't get me wrong,. I'm grateful for the love and support of my family. I give thanks everyday for the love and support of this congregation.

But I also know that there are times when my family can't be there with me. There are times when I have to face struggles or challenges and no one else can carry that burden for me. Perhaps some of you are dealing with those issues right now, today.

It's at those times when I give thanks that in fact we are not alone. The God of the Universe is with us, every step of the way, giving us strength and peace and joy.

But there is more. Because God loves me, I know that I have a purpose and a challenge to live up to. Here's what I mean by that. I meet a lot of people in life whom I call pinball people. You know what a pinball does... it just bounces from one thing to another, never really making decisions for itself, just reacting to whatever it hits, heading off in whatever random direction the bumper sends it.

I meet a lot of people like that. If everyone's drinking at the party, I'll drink. If everyone's headed in that direction, that's where I'm going. Whatever makes me happy at this moment is what I want. Whatever it takes.

The God of the Universe, because he loves us, steps in and says, wait a minute. I want more for you. I made you for a purpose. I made you to be people who love and care and serve and support each other. I made you to be people who care about the least of these. I made you to be people who honor commitments and uphold moral and ethical standards. I made you for a purpose.

To be a Christian doesn't mean to follow a bunch of rules. Living in a relationship with Christ doesn't simply mean I can only do religious things and I can't do anything that might even sound like fun. To be a Christian doesn't mean just following the rules.

But living in a relationship with Christ does remind me that because God loves me, he has boundaries and expectations for me. You've heard me talk about this before. When I leave church today, I'll get in my car and drive home. On the one hand, I'm free to drive any way I want to drive. I can ignore the stop signs, drive as fast as I want to, drive through all the red lights that get in my way. I can do that if I want to.

But I won't get home. Why do we have those rules about driving? It's not because there is some mean, oppressive police officer out there trying to take all the fun out of life. It's because we want to help each other get home and enjoy the real purpose for which we were created.

Because God loves us, there are expectations and there are boundaries to life. Some things are simply out of bounds. And as Christians we need to be willing to say so. But those boundaries are set because God has so much more in store for us. God created us to love and to serve and to care for this world.

And it's when we live as the people God created us to be we will experience the fullness of life that God has for us.

But there's one more thing. Because God loves us, we know that in the end we will experience victory. In just a few weeks, it's going to be Easter morning. It's going to be a great day. The sanctuary will be packed, the music will be spectacular, I'm confident even the weather is going to be outstanding. It's going to be a great day for us to celebrate the fact that in the end God will be victorious.

But let's not forget that before we get to Easter we have to go through Good Friday. We have to journey to the cross. Listen, in this life, there are going to be crosses we each have to bear. There are going to be hurdles and struggles and setbacks. There will be disease, and, yes, there will be death.

But as we face those setbacks, the assurance we have is that they will not have the final answer. In the end, God will be victorious, and here's the good news. God will share that victory with each of us.

That struggle you may be facing, that hill you may be climbing, will not have the final answer. Because God loves us, he promises us victory. In fact, he promises us eternal victory.

This morning is a time for us all to claim for ourselves the promise of God's love. I'm glad these confirmands are officially joining the church. I'm glad we have a number of new people joining the church today. The church is the place where our relationship with Jesus is nurtured. The church is the place where we worship and pray and give and study and serve. I'm glad people are joining the church.

But I also know that at its heart, to be a Christian isn't simply to be a church member. To be a Christian means to be in a relationship with the God who loves us and wants the very best for us.

During this Lenten season, we've been focusing on the life of Elisha, a fascinating Old Testament prophet who is often overshadowed by his predecessor, Elijah.

We read a great story from Elisha today. He and his people were hungry, and he sent someone out to get some vegetables they could cook into a stew. Apparently he sent someone who knew as much about gardening as I do, and so this person came back not with nourishing vegetables, but with some plant that our English translation calls a gourd.

In the Hebrew, the word refers to a plant that was known for having a really bitter taste to it. No one would ever knowingly eat this plant. It wasn't nourishing at all.

But God, through his servant Elisha, is able to take this foul smelling, bitter un nourishing meal, and transform it into something filling and nourishing and helpful.

Listen, if you follow the analogy, there are folks all around us trying to fill themselves on a stew that is every bit as un nourishing as this stew Elisha's people were trying to eat. There are people all around us running in all sorts of directions trying to find happiness, trying to find meaning, trying to get by in the world. There are a lot of people trying to live like that hosta that I left on my back porch, and quite frankly they're just drying up in the process.

In the midst of this crazy world in which we live, the God of the Universe, the God who made this world in the first place, steps up and says, "I love you." Come be in a relationship with me. "I'm the vine, and you are the branches. Come let me give you the nourishment you need. Come know that I love you."

*When we know that we are loved, we know we are of **value**, whatever the world may say to us. When we know that we are loved, we know we are **never alone**, even when our friends walk away.*

*When we know that we are loved, we know we have **something to live for**, a purpose worth seeking.*

*When we know that we are loved, we know that in the end **we will know victory and life for all eternity**.*

This morning is a time for our confirmation class, but really for each of us, to claim that love. Today is a day for us to reaffirm one of the first church songs we ever learned. It's also one of the most important songs we have ever learned. I hope you know it... really know it... deep down in your being. I hope and pray that you know that "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Knowing that love makes all the difference in the world.

As part of their confirmation process, our students have prepared a statement of their faith in Jesus. A week ago, they each shared their statement with the Session, but this morning we have asked two of them to share just a portion of what it means for them to know the love of Jesus. We're going to hear from two of our confirmands, and as they share their story, I invite you to give thanks to God for their life, but then also be asking yourself, what does it mean to me know that Jesus loves me. AMEN.