

Easter Life – Protected and Sent
John 17:6-19
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
May 13, 2018
Rev. Glen Bell

In 1953 newspaper editor Hodding Carter wrote, “A wise woman once said to me that there are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these, she said, is roots, the other, wings.”

Coach and author Rebecca Perkins centered on this theme in a blog post a few years ago. “One of my fundamental goals as a parent has been giving my children roots and wings, to raise them to have a strong sense of self and belonging and at the same time instilling in them through love, trust and respect the confidence to truly spread their wings and fly.”

She describes roots as a deep understanding of family and values, as “a shelter from the storm, a place inside that is always home.” She describes wings as the gift of freedom without conditions, “to give them our blessing to choose the path they will walk.”

On this Mother’s Day, many of you - mothers or godmothers, stepmothers or foster mothers, aunts or mentors or friends, confirmation partners or youth advisors or church school teachers – many of you look back and cherish the memories of helping form the lives of our loved ones.

Such formation involves the strong, rich balance of nurture *and* liberty, care *and* freedom, countless hours of dedicated love followed by selfless release of a loved one out into the world.

Jesus addresses this balance in his high priestly prayer from the gospel of John, as he is preparing to leave his disciples. He speaks of the continuing balance of the life of the children of God. We are at one and the same moment protected by God’s gracious presence *and* sent out into the world to serve in Christ’s name, to share the good news, to work powerfully for peace and justice.

Jesus loves his followers as a mother or father loves their child. They are mine, he announces. You gave them to me, almighty God, and I have cherished them and held them close. I have loved them fiercely, Jesus says. I have refused to let them go.

Jesus makes powerful claims before God about his spiritual children. They have obeyed God’s commandments and kept God’s Word. They trust that God is in Christ, that Jesus Christ is the very revelation of the Lord. They belong to Jesus. They are nothing less than children of God. They give Jesus glory through their trust and obedience.

Jesus grants us spiritual roots through his protection. He shelters us from the storms and gives us a home that is safe and secure. That is his prayer, that we may be protected, even as he himself guarded his first disciples.

What does this mean? That we are invited to experience God now as our loving, tender, protective Parent in our day-to-day life.

One of the ways I have most enjoyed participating in this the most during my ministry was serving as a table parent at the LOGOS Program in a previous congregation. Wednesday night after Wednesday night, Anne and I served a group of 6-7 children and youth as table parents. We ate together with these same girls and boys each week. We talked about brothers and sisters and family life, about school and teachers and homework, about anxieties and concerns and hopes and dreams. We truly got to know one another. We were all from different families, but there in the church fellowship hall, we connected.

Two years ago, a couple and their college-age son worshiped here with us in Sarasota one Sunday morning. They had been members of that church. I couldn’t believe how tall their son had become; I still recall him at age two or three when they first joined that congregation. We were standing out there in our south courtyard after worship that morning when one of them looked at me and said, “You have been so important in my spiritual development.”

That is what Christ offers us, week after week after week: the opportunity to grow in our spiritual development. Jesus still guards us. Jesus still shields us from the world's hatred. Jesus still gives us a community in which to belong, both to the Lord and one another.

This is home, in the very best sense of the word. This is protection from evil. This is a refuge and fortress in which we are safe.

We start with our roots.

But we cannot stop there. God sends us – safe, secure, protected – out into the world with wings to fly, with wings to serve and bless and care and encourage and share.

Why? Why are we sent into the world? Because our help is called for and our leadership is required. We are sent out because so many children and youth and adults need us.

We are sent out in Christ's name into a world in which the average age of a homeless person in the United States is 9. We are sent out in Christ's name here in Florida, where a living wage is \$ 28.50 an hour, and the average wage for an experienced cashier in this state is \$ 10.00 an hour. We are sent out in Christ's name in a nation in which 36% of college students say they are food insecure, another 36% say they are housing insecure, and 9% say they are homeless. We are sent out in Christ's name when the suicide rate among white males age 85 and over is nearly six times the overall suicide rate in the United States.¹

It is dangerous out there. But we cannot stay at home. Jesus declares that we will be hated for serving and blessing and caring and encouraging and sharing. Jesus announces that our path, our way, our journey lies out there, outside, out in a world where the foster parenting system in Florida has been completely overwhelmed by the opioid epidemic, where the electrical grid for millions of our neighbors in Puerto Rico is still not finished with hurricane season starting in less than three weeks, where Immokalee mothers and fathers still only earn \$ 350 a week for backbreaking labor in the fields.

I know. I know many of you are tired. I know many of you have already given your very best as mothers or godmothers, stepmothers or foster mothers, aunts or mentors or friends, confirmation partners or youth advisors or church school teachers. And I know that for some of us, it hasn't all turned out well.

We still hurt from that raw wound, deep in our heart, when we learned we were not able to bear children. We still hurt from that unresolved ache, beating with every heartbeat, from the son or daughter we have lost to death. We still hurt from that huge hole, right there in our core, from the child from whom we are estranged, because of drugs or conflict or mental illness or some reason we've never quite figured out.

But we cannot stay here. We cannot make ourselves at home, licking our wounds, defined only by our losses. We are given the power of God's Spirit, so that through God's love we are enabled to spread our wings and fly.

Even though we hurt, even though the way is dark, we press on in faith and make our way into the world. We are able because God is still mothering us, God is still our protector. Hear God's promise, no matter what our situation, no matter what our age or stage, from the prophet Isaiah: "Listen to me, O house of Jacob, O remnant of the house of Israel, you who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb. Even to your old age I am the One. Even when you turn gray I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear. I will carry and will save."²

Lewis Galloway shares this story related by preaching professor Fred Craddock. "I once heard Dr. Craddock tell about one of his students who was training as a chaplain in a nursing home. One of her assignments was to lead worship there. She asked Dr. Craddock to come listen to her sermon to help her develop her skills in preaching. The chapel service was held in a very plain multipurpose room. I like to imagine a bingo game up on a shelf, with stacks of magazines and glue and yarn and

¹ I am grateful to Jill Duffield, editor of The Presbyterian Outlook, for these figures.

² Isaiah 46:3-4

scissors spilling out of an open cabinet. The only thing that marked it as a holy space was a cloth thrown over a lunch table and a cross and two candles brought in by the volunteers.

“Some of the residents on walkers or in wheelchairs came in on their own steam. Attendants pushed the more debilitated residents in vinyl reclining chairs. The service began with a prayer and with volunteers leading the singing of familiar hymns. At the appropriate time the student chaplain read the gospel passage in which Jesus welcomes the little children.

“Dr. Craddock thought, ‘What is she thinking? She blew this one. How could she have so misread her congregation? Why is she reading this story about Jesus and the children in a nursing home?’

“As she started her sermon, she told them how much the children wanted to see Jesus and how their parents did everything they could to get close to him. She talked about how the disciples roughly pushed them away. They weren’t important enough to see Jesus. They weren’t physically able to come closer. They were powerless.

“Then she described how Jesus rebuked the disciples and asked the crowds to let the children come near. With tender gestures, she talked about how Jesus touched them, took them up in his arms, and let them sit on his lap. Dr. Craddock turned from looking at the student chaplain to looking at the faces of the residents.

“They followed her gestures with their eyes and drank in her words. Some were smiling and nodding. Suddenly Dr. Craddock realized how wrong he had been. The residents recognized the story of their lives in the story of Jesus and the children. They saw themselves as those children whom the world pushes away and does not value, but those whom Jesus lifts up. For a moment, you could see Jesus right there in that activity room, lifting his children out of their wheelchairs, casting off their walkers, hugging them and holding them close.”

Sisters and brothers, we are all children of God. We are protected, no matter what. And we are sent out together, as Jesus embraces us, to serve and bless and care and encourage and share.