

“Don’t Give Up!”—Biblical Offerings of Hope... *for Love to Grow*

Third of six Lenten sermons by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
March 7, 2021—Lent 3

- Ephesians 3:14-21 NRSV

¹⁴For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, ¹⁵from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. ¹⁶I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, ¹⁷and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. ¹⁸I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, ¹⁹and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

²⁰Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ²¹to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

- Mark 4:30-32 NIV

³⁰Again he said, “What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³²Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade.”

In the church season of Lent leading up to Easter, this year I’m offering this series called “Don’t Give Up! – Biblical Offerings of Hope.” This week’s installment is called “Hope for Love to Grow.”

The Mike Nichols movie “The Graduate” is an award-winning classic from the late 1960s. It starred Anne Bancroft as Mrs. Robinson, and playing Ben, the recent college graduate, the film featured a newcomer to the silver screen by the name of Dustin Hoffman.

It’s definitely worth seeing even if I spoil the ending by telling you that Ben disrupts the wedding of Mrs. Robinson’s daughter Elaine. Elaine and Ben run out of the church together, hop onto a passing city bus, and set off to start a new life together. The closing image of the movie is a protracted shot of the two of them sitting side by side in the back seat of the bus. You see their faces. They look at each other. Smile. Look into the distance, looking into the future. Is reality beginning to settle in? What have they done? What will their future hold? Do they love each other enough? Is the love they feel for one another enough? Will their love grow?

At various points in our lives we, too, may wonder that: *Will our love grow? Will we develop deeper bonds with our family? With significant friendships? And how about with God? Is my current relationship with God as good as it’s going to get? Or can my faith, my trust, my devotion, my love for God grow deeper, richer, fuller?*

From the Bible we hear assurance that our capacity to love *does* grow: our love for others, and our love for God. Second Thessalonians reads, “We must always give

thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing.”¹

Love grows. How does that happen?

In the verses we heard today from Ephesians the apostle Paul offered a prayer – a prayer for every generation. He prayed that all who have *heard* the good news of God’s love in Jesus Christ may become believers. Paul prayed that we will have faith to receive and embrace Jesus “in our hearts,” meaning that we will welcome the spirit of Jesus living within us. Coming to have faith in God through knowledge of Jesus *can* happen, Paul wrote, because we “are being rooted and grounded in love.”²

“...Rooted and grounded in love....” That’s an interesting mixed metaphor: “‘rooted’ is horticultural, denoting a firm bed in which plants are set; ‘grounded’ borrows the idiom of architecture and ensures a strong base on which a superstructure rests and rises....”³. I imagine that Paul used the image of being rooted in love and grounded in love to try to appeal to people from both rural and urban settings. Both suggest that our lives are embedded in God’s love which provides us a sure, firm, protective, nurturing base for our lives – for our lives now and eternally.

And blessed by God’s gift of love, we also believe that our love can grow and grow. Jesus told a parable about the kingdom of God by pointing to the mustard seed. He described it as the tiniest of seeds that grows into the largest of all garden plants. Yes, he used exaggeration to make his point: as small as a mustard seed is, there are smaller seeds such as those in a vanilla pod; and while a black mustard plant can reach a height of ten to twenty feet⁴, certainly there are plants that grow larger than that.

Of course, Jesus wasn’t intending to teach a lesson in botany; he was describing how God’s way, God’s will, God’s reign – the kingdom of God – can have small, humble beginnings but grow to enormous scope.

Paul used a common expression to describe the enormous scope of God’s love. Paul prayed that we who follow Jesus would know “the breadth and length and height and depth” of the love Christ has for us. That expression “breadth and length and height and depth” is sort of like “sea to shining sea” or “to the ends of the earth” or “from coast to coast” – they all suggest a vast, immeasurable, grand scale. Paul even wrote that he hoped that we would come “to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.”⁵ How can we “know” something that “surpasses knowledge?” The generosity and the grace of God’s love in Christ surpass our ability to understand, but it doesn’t keep us from being able to recognize and embrace that love.

Our love will grow because our lives are rooted and grounded in God’s love made visible and available to us through the coming of the Son Jesus Christ.

¹ 2 Thessalonians 1:3 NRSV

² Ephesians 3:17b NRSV

³ Ralph P Martin, *Interpretation – a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1991, p. 45.

⁴ Sasha Degnan, “What Is the Size of a Mustard Bush?” December 29, 2018 <https://homeguides.sfgate.com/size-mustard-bush-100618.html> accessed 2/24/2021

⁵ Ephesians 3:19a NRSV

If you watched the National Football League’s Super Bowl last month – actually, if you watched the commercials during the broadcast – you may have seen an ad for Toyota that featured a competitive swimmer named Jessica Long. She is quite accomplished – having won twenty-three medals – but I’ll admit that I’d never heard of her before. Maybe that’s because Jessica competes in the Paralympic Games. You see, for all practical purposes, she has no legs. As reported by NBC Sports, Jessica was

“born in Siberia with fibular hemimelia, which means she didn’t have fibulas, ankles, heels and most of the other bones in her feet.

She was adopted by Americans from a Russian orphanage at 13 months old and raised in Baltimore. At 18 months old, her legs were amputated below the knees. She has had more than a dozen surgeries.

Long began swimming in her grandparents’ pool after church on Sundays, pretending she was a mermaid. By age 10, she swam competitively. At 12, she made her Paralympic debut at the 2004 Athens Games, earning three gold medals.

Long competed in the next three Paralympics, running her medal total to 23....

In 2013, Long traveled with her younger sister to meet her birth parents, who were teenagers when Long was born Tatiana Olegovna Kirillova. An NBC Olympics production team accompanied her on a three-day journey to her Russian adoption center and then an 18-hour train ride to what would have been her Siberian hometown....

“When I first see my Russian family, I want them to know that I’m not angry with them, that I’m not upset that they gave me up for adoption,” Long said in the film, before a tearful, hug-filled reunion. “I think that was really brave, and I don’t know what I would have done if I was in her situation, at 16 and having this disabled baby that they knew that they couldn’t take care of. I want to tell her that when I see her that, if anything, I have so much love for her, my mom, because she gave me life.”⁶

Later in her Twitter account Jessica posted, “I love them more than words can say. My heart is so full.”⁷ Still later she added, “God had a plan for that little Russian orphan.”⁸

“Her strong love and appreciation for her family” are the result of Jessica’s devotion to her Christian faith.⁹ Can’t you imagine how the capacity for love grew in

⁶ “Jessica Long, swimmer in 2021 Super Bowl commercial, has incredible personal story” by Olympic Talk Feb 7, 2021 at <https://olympics.nbcsports.com/2021/02/07/jessica-long-super-bowl-commercial-swimmer-paralympics/#:~:text=Jessica%20Long%2C%20the%20swimmer%20in,decorated%20U.S.%20Paralympian%20in%20history.&text=Only%20fellow%20swimmer%20Trischa%20Zorn,Americans%20%E2%80%94%20an%20overall%20record%205>, accessed 2/23/2021

⁷ <https://www.brightvibes.com/369/en/overcoming-all-the-odds-paralympian-jessica-long-is-the-name-to-watch-in-rio> accessed 2/24/2021

⁸ <https://www.perma-bound.com/ViewDetail/158772-unsinkable-from-russian-orphan-to-paralympic-swimming-world-champion> accessed 2/24/2021

⁹ <https://www.perma-bound.com/ViewDetail/158772-unsinkable-from-russian-orphan-to-paralympic-swimming-world-champion> accessed 2/24/2021

Jessica: for her adoptive parents and grandparents and siblings; for her doctors and nurses and swim instructors and coaches; and in time, for her birth parents.

As Jessica grew, so did her ability to love and to be loved.

The Bible says that that can be our path as well. As St. Paul prayed in 1 Thessalonians Chapter 3, “May the Lord make your love for one another and for all people grow more and more...”¹⁰

Yes, love can grow as we welcome God’s love by taking Jesus Christ into our hearts to guide our lives.

- As newlyweds, your love can grow into a lifetime shared.
- For new parents, your love for your spouse will grow to encompass your new baby as well... and the next one, and the next one.
- For children, you can grow in your ability to embody Christ-guided values by the choices you make and the words you choose.
- For each of us, our actions and attitudes inspired by Christ’s love will become the example that others take from us.

St. Paul’s prayer in Ephesians is being lifted up even now: “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.”

[se20210307 © 2021 Jon M. Fancher]

¹⁰ 1 Thessalonians 3:12 Good News Translation