

EMBRACING IMPERFECTION



Scripture:

Psalm 112

¹Praise the LORD! Happy are those who fear the LORD, who greatly delight in his commandments. ²Their descendants will be mighty in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed. ³Wealth and riches are in their houses, and their righteousness endures forever. ⁴They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright; they are gracious, merciful, and righteous. ⁵It is well with those who deal generously and lend, who conduct their affairs with justice. ⁶For the righteous will never be moved; they will be remembered forever. ⁷They are not afraid of evil tidings; their hearts are firm, secure in the LORD. ⁸Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid; in the end they will look in triumph on their foes. ⁹They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever; their horn is exalted in honor. ¹⁰The wicked see it and are angry; they gnash their teeth and melt away; the desire of the wicked comes to nothing.

Luke 14:1, 7-14

¹On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely.

⁷When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. ⁸“When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; ⁹and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. ¹⁰But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” ¹²He said also to the one who had invited him, “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. ¹³But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



Yes, I stole the title of my sermon from the name of our church retreat, but it fit my life and probably yours! (I would encourage you to read a copy of “The Gifts of Imperfection,” the book for the retreat. It will make you feel a whole lot better about the imperfections we often don’t want to acknowledge.)

Will Willimon, theologian and writer, tells this story

about a friend of his who played football in college. At the end of the football season, the president of the college would host the entire team to a sit-down dinner at his house.

All the team had to wear coats and ties. The president would sit at one end of the table and his wife at the other. During the meal, one of the defensive linemen leaned

back in his chair. Now this was a big young man, and as he did so, the back legs of the chair broke. As he fell backwards, he grabbed the tablecloth, pulling down the whole table full of china, crystal, food and drink.

His teammates sat frozen in horror. The president's wife looks upon the ruined banquet that had slid onto the floor, folded her napkin and said, "It appears dinner has ended. Would any of you young men like dessert?"

ANOTHER DINNER PARTY

Luke 14 tells us of another dinner party where a Pharisee had invited all his rich and distinguished friends to dine with him. The host was a very pious, religiously knowledgeable person, and a keeper of the law.

Jesus had also been invited. Most of the guests were critical of Jesus, watching him in hope that Jesus would slip up and violate some aspect of religious law. Jesus turned the tables on them and ruined the dinner party with his words to those who were seeking to lift themselves up into the most sought-after positions. "All who lift themselves up will be brought low, and those who make themselves low will be lifted up."

Then Jesus turns to the host and criticizes his choice of invited guests. "Don't invite your rich friends. Invite those who are not important, those who cannot repay you. Invite the poor, the troubled, ordinary folk with problems. You will be repaid when the just are resurrected."

With his pride and his dinner party pretty much ruined by Jesus, the Pharisee could have asked, "Would anybody like dessert?" to cover his embarrassment and distress.

The Jewish folk of Jesus' day worshiped not only on the Sabbath, but before the dinner meal, just as many of us do before our evening meal. In this story, Jesus suggests to his host that he include ordinary folk to have dinner with him.

Friends, Jesus' teachings have just as much meaning for us today as they did when he told them. When we gather each week for worship and we gather as one people around the table to partake of the Lord's Supper, we are to invite others to join us; ordinary folk with normal problems or with difficult problems, people who need to know of God's amazing, healing love and forgiveness. When is the last time you invited someone to come and worship with us?

A MEMORABLE SUNDAY FOR ME

A few months ago, on a memorable Sunday to me, March 24, 2019 to be specific, my brother Dave dropped me off in front of Presbyterian Church of the Roses. We

had just moved to Santa Rosa from Paradise and I didn't know my way around town. He told me he was pretty sure that I would like this Presbyterian Church.

I walked in and was greeted by the ushers who welcomed me and gave me a PCOR welcome bag with some material about the church and made me feel comfortable. I looked around and saw a variety of folk. As I sat down in a pew, people turned to greet me and by the time for the "Passing of the Peace" was over, I had been greeted by many "ordinary," friendly individuals who appeared to be "at home" in the church and there was an excitement for worship of the LORD. During the service, some new members were introduced to the congregation, which told me this was a vital growing congregation!

The church did other rather amazing things such as feeding breakfast to the high school students, providing activities and a place for those adults who need special love and care because of possible dementia and other problems. The entire bulletin was full of classes and opportunities for service!

I thought of the story I had heard of a church whose membership had dropped because people were aging, and many members were moving to be closer to their families and some were dying. The pastor challenged them, "Don't invite just your friends that you know well. Invite someone who is having a rough time right now. Say to them, "We need you to help make us the church that Jesus intends us to be." Invite someone who has just lost someone they love, or is without a job, or someone who has been hurt by someone else and tell them, "We don't want you to go through your difficulties alone. Come and tell us your story."

I felt that this church, Presbyterian Church of the Roses, might be just that sort of church. When my brother picked me up, I could hardly wait to get home to call my friends from Paradise to tell them that 'I had found my new church home!' All of us who had lived in Paradise had been scattered around to various communities. To say I had found my new church home was an important happening!

A church home that adopted the hurt, and the imperfect and cared for displaced people was important, as I had recently been all of those! A few days later, I received a call from Pastor Cindy telling me that someone in the congregation had bought pots and pans, silverware and a set of dishes for us. We had arrived at our new home with two camp chairs, two Costco air mattresses and borrowed sleeping bags.

MY STORY

A few weeks ago, Pastor Cindy asked me to share my story which is similar to many of the stories of folk whose homes burned here in Santa Rosa.

Home is very important to me since I lost my home,

my friends, my church and the town I lived in for seventeen years to the Paradise Camp fire on November 8, 2018. It started out as a lovely day. I let my cat out and got dressed. A friend called me later to ask me why it was dark outside. I looked out and replied, "Betty, get your garage door open right now before the power goes off and get packed. It looks like a fire!" I ran down the stairs and turned the TV on. The newsperson told us that if we lived in Paradise and surrounding communities to leave as fast as possible.

My brother and I grabbed our 'to go bags,' our computers and important papers. Since I couldn't get my cat in, I left food and water for him and left. Dave took his truck and I took my car following him. Truthfully, we assumed we would be back after the fire was out. This was the 5th time I had been "evacuated" in 17 years and I always was able to return in a week or so. Little did I know that I would never see my house or my cat again.

When we reached the main road, we progressed at a snail's pace. It was pitch dark with smoke and I kept my headlights on the back of Dave's white pickup truck. We learned later that the fire was traveling a football field a second with the magnitude of the horrific wind.

All of a sudden, the fire was on both sides of the road and we were progressing only a couple of inches every so often, and then we came to a complete halt. I, like many of you will never forget the heat, the darkness of the smoke and the flying embers. I couldn't believe that the fire had spread from the Feather River Canyon to the town of Paradise in only a few minutes!

We were stalled on the road with trees, buildings and brush burning up to the side of the road. It seemed like 'forever' since the car had moved an inch. A telephone pole had burnt and was hanging by the live electric wire next to us on the road. A young man on a motorcycle was in the lane next to my brother and a big glowing ember fell on his jacket. The woman in the car next to mine, jumped out, ran to the young man and pulled his jacket off. Luckily, neither one of them were burned!

GOD WAS BESIDE ME

It was at that point when the reality hit me that we might not go make it out alive. It hit me calmly. There was nothing we could do. It occurred to me that it was time to thank God for the wonderful life, opportunities and blessing God had given me. I knew with certainty that God did not cause the fire. God was right there beside me in this journey of life, never letting go of my hand no matter what happened! I thanked God for all the amazing opportunities God had given me in life and for my friends, and for my children and grandchildren. I suddenly wished I could say goodbye to my family and let them know how much I loved them!

Amazingly, just about that time the cars started to move, a few feet at a time. We got by the telephone pole

that was ready to pull the wire down on top of us and breathed a sigh of relief and thanksgiving.

Further down the road past what had been the business section, they had opened the lane coming up from Chico for our use. This doubled the volume of the cars exiting and that helped make the journey easier and faster. Little by little we made it down to the town of Chico. Our lane was diverted across the Highway 70 Freeway. We ended up across from Costco in Chico.

We pulled over to the side of the road, and both of us jumped out of our vehicles and ran towards each other and hugged one another, both proclaiming with amazement that we were alive and thanking God for that miracle! The next thing I did was to call my children and let them know that I was okay and that I loved them!

Some friends had phoned before we left the house, telling us to come to their home, where we stayed until Thanksgiving. I was lucky. As soon as we got there, I phoned Sycamore Glen Retirement Center in Chico where my mother had lived for ten years before she died. I was able to procure a one-bedroom apartment that we could get into after Thanksgiving. Many of my friends were not so lucky and had to find refuge far away.

We lived at Sycamore Glen Retirement Center for three months while we searched for a place to live. One of the wonderful developments was that I also was able to procure the meeting room on Sunday mornings for the remnants of Craig Congregational Church with which I had been associated.

My brother, Dave, had lived in Santa Rosa and raised his family there before moving to Reno, and then later, moving in with me in Paradise. He had family still in Santa Rosa and encouraged me to look for a home for us there.

I really didn't want to come to a big city like Santa Rosa (compared to Paradise). My feelings were confirmed when we were looking for a home here in January. In the house we were touring, I hurried back through the kitchen of the house to view a screened in porch that I had in mind to make my 'studio.' I didn't see a step and fell through the attached laundry room door hitting the back of my head on the cement. Oh, the mess I caused. My head was bleeding profusely, and I did not dare move as I wasn't certain about my neck. Dave's family were with us and called an ambulance and I was taken to Memorial Hospital. They kept me in the Intensive Care Unit over night to monitor a small brain bleed. Then they kept me three days longer. So, as you can see, Santa Rosa wasn't high on the charts for me!

NEW OPPORTUNITIES

I firmly believe that out of every catastrophe God gives us new opportunities. I just wanted to be in control of choosing that place for those opportunities to happen. However, God had God's own plans for me and led us back to Santa Rosa! Amazingly I was led to this church days after we moved here. I knew then that God had a purpose for me here.

The very first Sunday, Pastor Cindy listened to me as I told her I was a retired Presbyterian pastor and had a background in chaplaincy and pastoral care and experience as a pastor in three churches.

Later, Pastor Cindy suggested that as a retired pastor, I could be a Parish Associate. That means that as a member of the Presbytery, I could volunteer in this congregation. I met with the appropriate Presbytery Committee which accepted me.

MY QUILT OF LIFE

In retrospect, my life before the fire seemed to me much like a quilt, with perfect colors and shapes. Those who are quilters will understand. Let me tell you about my 'quilt' of life.

I grew up in Palo Alto, married and attended San Jose State University where I earned a General Education credential and a Special had been a Special Education Credential. I became a Special Education Teacher in Palo Alto. I had two sons. I also worked in two Presbyterian Churches in Palo Alto as a Christian Educator.

When my children were grown and out of the house, I felt a call from God to become a pastor. I wrestled with the call for a couple of years, finally enrolling at San Francisco Theological Seminary. I cut my teaching hours down to half time and began commuting to the Seminary several days a week. I did my required internship at Stanford Hospital in Clinical Pastoral Education. By the time I graduated, it was almost ten years later, but I did it.

I was called to Covenant Presbyterian Church in San Antonio, Texas as an Associate Pastor, later moving back to California to Trinity Presbyterian in West Sacramento as an Interim Pastor and then to the Presbyterian Church of San Martin, CA near Morgan Hill as a Solo Pastor. Following the sudden death of my husband, I retired and moved to Paradise to take care of my mother until her death six years later.

It was then that my brother moved in with me to share the house. I volunteered as a Hospice Chaplain for Enloe Hospital in Chico and directed a Caring Ministry out of Craig Congregational Church in Paradise. (Lest you wonder, there was no Presbyterian Church in Paradise.) My friends came over to work on art projects once a week and I led a prayer and meditation group and book group. I was a member of several organizations focused on service to the community. It was close to being almost a perfect "quilt," and I was satisfied. (Quilters know there

is no such thing as a perfect quilt).

Yes, there had been some tragic and difficult times in my life, but I always could rely on God walking with me and guiding me through the tough times as well as the ordinary times.

CONSTRUCTING A NEW LIFE QUILT

Then on Nov. 8, 2018, that perfect "quilt" of my life burned in the fire. I find that I am rapidly constructing a new life "quilt," a crazy "quilt" of memories of old friends and experiences, and new friends and experiences.

Symbolically it is beautifully haphazard, as pieces are added, such as better communication with family, moving in our own home, classes offered by Santa Rosa Junior College in Oakmont, and best of all, the Presbyterian Church of the Roses. I am enjoying participating in Hour of Prayer, Sacred Space, Book Study, Qi Gong, visiting Homebound and hospitals and adding here and there 'pieces' to the new quilt as I get to know and cherish new friends. I have joined the 'Boomers' group, work with the Deacons and attend Presbyterian Women's Association. Each Sunday brings new opportunities. It is a crazy, imperfect "quilt," and God is shaping it with a border of love. That border shapes and defines the new "quilt" of my life as I symbolically stitch on new shapes and colors every day. (These two quilts that I showed are two out of six quilts that friends and former churches where I served have sent to me.) My brother and I have been very blessed! When we give thanks before dinner, we seem continually to be amazed and thankful for all that God has done for us.

I feel this new congregation is wonderfully imperfect, being open to everyone who walks through the doors. I have made wonderful friends here. It could possibly be that perhaps we are on the way towards becoming the type of congregation that Jesus was telling the Pharisees about in our morning's scripture from Luke 14. We are an eclectic, imperfect people that strive to reach out to others in need, other imperfect people like ourselves. Yes, we still have a way to go. There are a lot of imperfect hurting folk in the community and we need to keep inviting others to come. But I believe God is leading us to embrace imperfection in ourselves and others as we seek to do God's will. Thanks be to God! Amen



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