

“ROOTS AND WINGS”
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Elkton United Methodist Church
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Galatians 1:1-12

Luke 7:1-10

The date was June 10, 1973 – forty years ago next Monday. That’s the date I graduated from Elkton High School, and what a day it was. We gathered in the football stadium. The stands were packed with the family members and friends of all of us 270 graduates. We stood in line waiting to process in to the music of Elgar’s Pomp and Circumstance – the girls in light blue gowns and the guys in dark blue gowns. We laughed and chattered, and prayed that we wouldn’t trip going up onto the stage to receive our diplomas. It was a great day, with lots of laughter and plenty of tears!

It’s the kind of day that lots of the families in our church are experiencing these days – some have already had their ceremonies, but there are a lot of them coming up this week. It is an exciting time, and bittersweet at the same time. Who can help but think, as you watch your grown up child receive his or her diploma, about that first day of school, when you walked them to the school bus and watched them ride away from you – and how incredibly fast all those years went!

No doubt, many of you will have parties, and you’ll give gifts. But I want to invite you, even as you give those graduation gifts, to remember the bigger gifts you’ve given them. You’ve heard that old saying – “There are two lasting gifts we give our children – one is roots, and the other is wings.”

You, as parents and grandparents, have given your children roots. From the day you brought them home from the hospital, you’ve surrounded them with love and security, cared for their needs, encouraged them, supported them, sometimes sparred with them – but always you gave them roots to make them strong.

We’ve tried to do that as a church as well. When your children were baptized (here or at any other church), the congregation pledged to help you raise them, and to help provide them with spiritual roots. So we’ve provided Sunday School, and youth group, choirs and acolyte programs, confirmation class, mission trips and so many other things. We’ve been spiritual mentors to them, and we’ve delighted to watch them mature in their faith.

So you, and all of us, have done our best to give them roots. And now, it's wings time – time to let them fly on their own, have their own triumphs, survive their own struggles – and grow to be the person God created them to be. They will need the roots we have helped give them, because the world can be a challenging place – in so many ways. But today, I want to speak about some specific challenges to their faith that might lie ahead.

We hear about them from the Apostle Paul in this morning's Epistle lesson. He talks very candidly in that lesson about deserting the faith and listening to false gospels. If you know anything about young people, those years after first leaving high school are the times they are very susceptible to deserting the faith. I remember my college years. When I went away to Salisbury, it was the first time in my life that it was up to me whether or not I went to church. From the time I was born, since my father always directed church choirs, we went to church every single Sunday. Not going was not an option.

Ah, but then I got to college, and there was nobody there telling me I needed to get up and go to church. So, like a lot of college students, I didn't. I just stopped going. And it's not because there were no United Methodist Churches in Salisbury – I think there are eight UM churches in Salisbury! I just decided I'd rather sleep in instead.

It wasn't until a while later, when I was really struggling with homesickness, and the challenge of college level work, that things changed. I was on the phone with my mother on a Saturday night crying out of loneliness and homesickness and worried about my grades – I think I had just gotten a C on an assignment, something which was foreign to me in high school – so it was a tough time. Mom suggested that I go to church the next morning. I replied that I didn't want to go, because I wouldn't know anybody there. And you know what she said back to me? "Yes, you will." In other words, God would be there, I wouldn't be alone.

And so I went, and then I went again, and again, and I am convinced that going to church made me stronger and more confident, and helped the homesickness eventually go away.

So to all of you young people who are getting ready to go to college – in the words of Paul, "don't desert your faith," rather let your faith help carry you through

the journey. You'll always have someone with you, as my mother said, you'll never be alone, and you'll be stronger for it.

The other thing I want to say to you is the other thing Paul said – beware of false teaching. College campuses are filled with all kinds of groups espousing all kinds of beliefs, and if you're not strong in your faith, you can be swayed by some of them.

Thirdly, let me remind you of something from this morning's Gospel lesson. Remember how the centurion had a slave who was dying, but in humility didn't want to bother Jesus with it. You need to know that the centurion was a big deal in that society. You heard what the Jewish elders said about him to Jesus – how he was worthy of Jesus healing his slave. He was a big deal, and by all rights, he could have pulled rank and demanded Jesus' attention. But he didn't – he was humble and unassuming, not demanding his rights, but deferring attention from himself.

Now, why do I mention him? Because some of you who are graduating are among the best and brightest in your class. I have no doubt you will do amazingly well at college, and achieve amazing things in life. I also have no doubt that some of you will end up being "big deals" yourself. So, take a lesson from Jesus, and learn humility early. Learn that you don't deserve any more special treatment than anyone else. Learn that God created everyone equal – and just because you're smarter or you're going to college when others aren't, or you have more degrees or make more money or are more attractive – doesn't mean you ever have to pull rank. Rather, like the centurion, embrace humility and a healthy sense of your self, instead of being puffed up, and needing to be the center of the universe.

So those are just a few more roots for you as you make your way into the future. But those of you who are not a graduate, which includes most of you, I hope you listened as well. Because the lessons that I highlighted for the graduates out of this morning's scriptures, are for all of us as well. We too need to always work at our faith, and not fall away. It's not just after high school, that we're susceptible to that – it's forever and ever.

You know how easy it is to get out of the routine of coming to church. One week can slip into another then another and another, and pretty soon everything else takes precedence.

And you know how easy it is not to continue to grow in your faith – how the mentality of “Sunday School is for kids” can take over, and you stop going to Sunday School or taking short-term classes, or stop whatever you were doing.

And oh, how easy it is to be swayed by false teaching. This world will try to tell you that everything is all about you, and it really doesn't matter what you believe, and well, you know the routine.

So to all of you, too, I echo Paul's words – stay strong in your faith, be committed to it, be committed to Christ. Then your faith will carry you through all of life – the good times and the bad, the times of triumph and the times of struggle.

And hear for yourself, as well, the words I gave to the graduates about humility. A true mark of a follower of Jesus Christ is humility. We know that life is not all about us, and what makes us happy and successful – life is about love and sharing and caring.

I keep enjoying the stories I'm hearing about Pope Francis, and how humble he is. On Maundy Thursday, I shared how he, when he was first elected Pope, rode back to his hotel on a bus instead of in a limousine, and when it came time to check out of the hotel, he carried his own luggage, and paid his own bill. I saw pictures this week of him sitting, for his papal audience, in a plain brown chair, instead of a golden throne, as had previous popes. Little things, yes, but they say volumes about humility, and how Francis is a man who understands that it's not all about him – it's about God.

Finally, I want to tell you about a time when I witnessed true humility. It was at a viewing actually – a viewing for a pastor's wife. She was young when she died, and the line to get into the viewing was hours and hours long. It snaked all through the church, out into the hallways, and then out the front door of the church. I was among the first to arrive, and still I had to wait 45 minutes in line. After I had greeted the family, and was making my way out of the church – way near the end of the line was our Bishop, Peggy Johnson. From where she was standing, she clearly would probably have about a three hour wait to see the family. I went up to her and told her to just walk ahead into the church – I knew the family would want to see her, and I knew the funeral director could escort her to the head of the line. But she wouldn't do it. She wouldn't pull rank, if you will, and pass by all those others who were standing there too. That's humility. That's what Jesus would do. And what a witness that was to the people standing there in line with her – all of whom knew who she is – the Bishop.

So, to the graduates, and to all of you, and to myself, I invite all of us to hear these words of Paul and Jesus well this morning, and to have them as part of our root system. May we never turn away from the Lord and from the church, may we be strong in our faith so that we never fall victim to false teachings, and may we walk the way of Jesus, with humility about ourselves, and a care for others.

With those roots of faith in our lives, then may we soar on the wings of faith into abundant life! May it be so.

Amen.