

“Rejoice in Hope” based on John 14:15-21, Psalm 115:1-8, and Romans 12:6-16

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Children’s Sunday, May 14, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

Today, I want to tell the story of a young woman named Kristen, whose parents refused to help her. Well, that’s not true, but to her, it seemed that way. It seemed like they never helped her when she thought she needed help most. They simply gave her advice, and they expected her to follow through. As a result, Kristen made a lot of mistakes over the years, but her parents always loved and supported her, allowing her to become quite successful in life.

You see, when Kristen wanted something, her parents refused to just buy it for her. While in college, she wanted a new pair of jeans, but they cost \$100 dollars. Knowing her parents would say “no,” she decided she needed to get a job. But she didn’t want to commit to a job that you have to go to, and get paid an hourly wage, when she wanted money fast.

So, she offered to clean a house, a very big house, 4,000 sq feet. She brought one bottle of glass cleaner and towels and said she would do it all in two hours. It took seven, and she said she didn’t do a good job. But the customer invited her back. Soon she was cleaning more homes and hired people to clean with her. Then she hired people to clean for her.

Soon, she owned her own business, while she was still in school studying business. Her father told her to get her business incorporated, making it official. He warned that before doing so, she should check her business’s name, making sure that no other business existed with that name. She figured though that she came up with her name herself, and surely no one was called, “Student Maid Brigade.” Who else would come up with that? So, she bought a lot of stuff, like cups, car magnets, and pens, all with that name on them.

Just as her father had warned her, there was another business with a similar name, and their lawyers sent her a letter demanding she stop using the name. They had it first. In her book, “Permission to Screw Up: How I Learned to Lead by Doing (Almost) Everything Wrong,” Kristen Hadeed writes about calling her dad and asking for help:

“Between sobs, I begged him to find out if I had really violated the law, thinking there might be some sort of loophole. I knew he was all about me solving my own problems, but I hoped that just this once, he’d forgo the teaching moment and help me. I wanted him to tell me he was going to call the attorney and get it all cleared up. No such luck.”

What he did do, was tell her what the consequences would be, if she ignored the warning. The company had informed her of the mistake, but they had not taken any legal action. He told his daughter that this was her opportunity to reach out and handle it. She called the lawyers, explained her mistake, and gave up the name. She threw away all the stuff she had just made with the other name. And shortly after, she realized she could shorten her name, changing it to “Student Maid,” and be clear – she checked twice this time for other businesses, and found none with that name.

Sometimes, I think we treat God like Kristen treats her father, and God responds as her father did. We pray for God to just fix things for us this once, even if it is the result of our own mistake, even if our actions have hurt someone else, or they could hurt someone else. Just fix it. We assume that if God is with us, then God must surely always take our side, and if God does not take our side, then maybe God is not with us. But Kristen’s dad did not take her side, yet he stayed with her. He didn’t

intervene on her behalf, but he guided her, pointing her in the right direction as he did before, when she did not listen.

Our texts today walk us through an understanding of God's presence with us, and what this means for our perfection, and also, our protection, as children of God. In the ancient world, the gods of the people were like businesses – if you needed something, you shopped around. You found the one that seemed to meet your needs. You'd go to one and offer a sacrifice in one way, and then to another and do the sacrifice in the right way there. If something went your way, you could brag that you earned the favor of that god and it did what you wanted. You became an expert on how to appease that god or another.

The whole Roman empire in Jesus's time believed their good fortune – the fact that they were an empire at all – was because they did the rituals right. They believed they had good things because they did what the gods wanted in the correct way. The Psalmist instead says the Lord should receive the honor, not us. Good fortune is not because we have appeased the God of Israel and done things perfectly. Rather, it is because the God of Israel loves faithfully and loyally.

The translation read today from the Easy-to-Read Version, says God, "does whatever he wants." That sounds weird. In other translations, it says God does, "whatever he pleases." That's not much different. Is God being selfish? Is God able to do whatever God wants for whatever reason? Of course not. That's not what that means. This does not mean God is selfish, doing whatever, whenever, for absolutely no good reason.

The point is that God's blessings – the things that God gives to bring us closer to God – are not dependent on us. Blessings do not depend on what we do to earn them and or the glory we earn by our actions. Unlike those who try to appease the statues made of gold and silver, our actions are not meant to earn God's favor, but to thank and trust God for working all things for our good. God's love for us is a faithful lovingkindness and true, or reliable, dependable, loyal. Despite our mistakes and our failures, God always loves us. We demonstrate our love then in return by obeying God, by loving God and we love our neighbor as ourselves, because this is how God loves us.

Paul's letter says we all have different gifts, and these gifts are from God, but not earned. These are grace, or unmerited favor that God gives us, so we had better use them. We are made complete, or perfected, before God not by earning what we want, but by being changed, or as he says earlier, transformed. Being perfect means using the gifts that God has given us, being sincere, or real, in our love, turning from what is evil, and sticking to what is good, be devoted to each other. In fact, we are to show a preference for others.

Harrison today, walked us through Romans 12:12 from the Easy-to-Read translation. In your pew bibles, it reads, 'Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer.' We are more familiar with this pithier version, but the Easy-to-Read version really opens up the "hopeful expectation" captured in the original Greek. "Rejoice in hope," is beautifully said. But "Be happy in the hope you have," is more consistent with the original meaning. And our hope is "Grace" with a capital G, meaning Jesus, because in Jesus we see God's desire to be with us, because he came down to be with us, which is the good news, or gospel.

But God being with us is not about God always taking our side against other people, but it is about knowing that no matter what others may do, or the mistakes we make, God's love is faithful and

reliable, it is constant and empowering to comfort us and make us strong. It gives us the ability to learn and grow, by sharing with others, wishing good for those who treat us poorly, asking God to bring them close, to bless them and not curse them. It is rejoicing with those who rejoice, and mourning with those who mourn, being humble and finding friends among the unimportant.

We teach this to our kids, or try to, but this is hard to do because the world pressures us to do the opposite. I'm told I have to prove I'm wright. The world pressures us to get back at those who hurt us – it's only right that I do it back to them to fix this. The world tells us to show our superiority – I'm better than that person. The world wants us to win friends in important places. Paul says to do the opposite. That is a challenge.

This is where our gospel reading comes in. Jesus tells us that love is doing. It's an action. If we say that we love Jesus, we will do what Jesus commands. What is his ultimate command? It's to love others as I have loved you. But Jesus is not with us, like he was with the apostles, Yet even those who were with Jesus struggled with this. Remember, John and James wanted to strike down the Samaritans with lightning. How are we supposed to love, when those who had Jesus standing right next to them struggled with loving others and being perfect?

Jesus promises another intercessor, or advocate, the paraclete, a word that in the Greek, means literally, "someone who calls out at our side," and this is the Holy Spirit. Jesus is still our advocate, but he has ascended into heaven. It is in heaven, that the risen Jesus, still fully one with us, and with God, who shared in our life, going to that cross for us, and rising for us. Paul says he advocates and prays for us in the presence of the Father, but it is the Spirit, also fully God, sent by the Father, that lives and reigns in us and among us now. This is how we know God is with us now. The Holy Spirit is God with us in this room right now.

The Spirit is the binding force of the Trinity, in which the Father and Son love each other, and so, since Christ shared in our humanity, the Spirit binds us with him. We are given the inheritance that belongs only to the Son, which is the divine love of God and the abundant and eternal life of God. This Spirit fills us with love, but I don't always feel that love. We have to recognize that love and choose to see this Spirit in us, empowering us to love others as Jesus loved us. And so we follow this command to join in the love of the Father for the Son, the eternal and divine love.

My sisters and brothers, the simple truth is that you are loved by God, and that the Holy Spirit is present here, in and among us, and we must let it guide us. This does not mean we will never make mistakes, but it does mean that we learn from them. We must live empowered to be transformed by this love and to change the world around us.

When we feel frustrated in our lives, because it feels like we are going through something really hard, know that God's comfort is like a warm hug meant to make you stronger, and that you are not alone. You have an advocate, the Spirit, calling out at your side on your behalf for you to grow.

Now, I know there is no comparison or analogy for this that fits perfectly for anything in our faith. But there are things we can think about to help us understand. So, I offer you that wand we want God to just come in and fix it, whether it was our mistake or not, we might do well to consider the philosophy Kristen Hadeed learned from her parents, which she calls her credo for leadership: *"Trust people with enormous responsibilities, allow room for mess-ups, then give them the chance to fix their mistakes so they can learn from them."*

She said this is not a philosophy they teach in business school, but I do believe that whether she and her father know it or not, this is a philosophy taught in scripture.

God trusts every one of you, great and small, with enormous responsibilities – you are to bear God’s image in this world. You are called to be the hands and feet of Christ, loving others as he loves you. You are to be empowered to take the love of the Holy Spirit poured in your heart and share it with others. God also allows room for mess-ups. That’s why it is grace, the unmerited favor of God, means that we do not earn God’s favor, but it comes in Christ, who lived in our humanity, died for us, and rose again, and so by trusting in this grace, we find forgiveness, calling us to keep trying to get it right.

And so, we are given the opportunity always to make amends, to fix our mistakes, so our minds are transformed or changed, and we can resume those enormous responsibilities of reflecting God’s image, centered on sharing in God’s work to transform this world in and through, the ministry of reconciliation by which Jesus is restoring the world.

Friends, you are loved more than you know. You are loved fully and completely by God. Our responsibility is to know that love and share that love. Be happy in the hope we have, because our hope is that God is with us. Be patient in your troubles because God is with you and there to comfort you. Pray all the time because we speak to God through our words and deeds. Amen.