

“A Family Bound in Faith, Hope and Love” based on Romans 8:12-25

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on Sunday, July 23, 2023, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

In our reading today, Paul is speaking to his Roman readers about change – major changes. Yet for Paul, this “change” he is proposing to them is not the rejection of what came before, but its restoration. The apostle’s theme in writing this letter is unity between Jews and Gentiles. It is the restoration of humanity as one family through faith in Israel’s God.

Paul says this God is fully revealed in the crucified and risen Messiah. And the Roman church to which Paul is writing this letter is a microcosm of the challenge of this message of reunification, because in this church there are Jews and Gentiles who are struggling with change. They are having a hard time getting along.

Yet Paul does not offer them an easy answer. He appeals to tradition, to the past, in order to justify innovation and the slow, even painful process of making all things new. To the Jews who appeal to their family heritage to boast in this community, Paul points back to Abraham as the grandfather of Israel and all believers by faith. To Gentiles who boast of their strength because they are able to ignore the law that was never imposed on their lives anyway, Paul points out that before law was ever given, Abraham was still faithful to Lord God and he trusted in the one true God, which was credited to him as the very thing which made him right with God.

And so, in our passage today, Paul brings his theology to its climax in this letter, that we are all one family in Abraham by our faith and by the faithfulness of Jesus – and this is true whether or not we are descended by blood from Abraham. It’s true also, regardless of anything we have done to earn it, be it in the law itself, or a Gentile’s ability to reject the law altogether. It is only by the Holy Spirit that we know we are God’s children. It is by the Spirit that the children are revealed as adopted as heirs through Jesus, the one true Son of God, who alone is worthy of this inheritance.

So, what does this mean for us? How do we understand this theology in our own lives. To help us, I’d like to use an illustration I used last year at Montreat – the movie “Encanto.” I love this movie. Now, Encanto is fundamentally a movie about change and about hope. It is about growing in the heart of tradition, not its rigidity and inflexibility. It has been said that it speaks to the immigrant experience, to the impact of trauma over generations, and most certainly family conflict.

But last night, as I watched this moving with my wife and kids, while holding this Roman’s passage in my mind, I could not ignore the parallels between the movie and this passage. And so, I concluded that Encanto must be an allegory for the church. At least, that’s how I see it. I’m doubtful that’s what the original writers had in mind but hear me out.

For those of you who may not have seen the movie, it is about an Encanto, a word for a charming village. The village was founded by refugees from a war who were being chased down in the night, when one of them, a father of newborn triplets, gave his life to save them all. This sacrifice then bestowed on his widow and children a special gift – a miracle. This miracle was visible to them by a candle that never stopped burning.

The candle bestowed special gifts on the three children. One could control the weather. Another healed the sick. The third had the gift of prophecy. The first two were women who married villagers and their children were given gifts too. One child was tirelessly strong and hardworking. Another

created beauty through flowers. Another possessed the knowledge that comes with the ability to hear everything. Her brother could be anyone, fill any need, by shapeshifting into other people.

The protagonist of the movie is a young woman named Mirabel. She is fifth grandchild, and she never received a gift from the candle. We pick up the story on the youngest cousin's birthday, the sixth grandchild. We step into the anticipation that he will receive a gift, along with the fear that he will not. And so, the widow, now known as Abuela, meaning grandmother, is very concerned. She wants everything to be just right. She wants to control the situation.

I think that many of us look at the church, much in the same way Abuela sees her family. We know the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and the miracle of his death, resurrection and ascension that saved us. Yet, we act as if we have to control the miracle. We decide that the miracle is best put to use for X, Y, and Z. Then we treasure those who have the greatest powers with in it – whether it is those who can manipulate the world around us in a positive way, those who can heal, or those who can prophesy the future. We treasure the strong for all the work they can do, and the artistic for all the beauty they give us, and those who listen, who learn and who know everything. We love those who easily change to fit in and make themselves useful.

And while we look at the church and the world through Abuela's eyes, when we look at ourselves, we often see ourselves as Mirabel, powerless to contribute, wishing some miracle made us more than we really are, and desiring to be recognized in some way to avoid feeling like we are outcasts. In truth, the greatest and the least among us are all heirs through Christ, not because of our gifts, but because of the gift given to us in the miracle itself.

For us, this miracle does not begin with a father of triplets sacrificing his life by standing up standing up to warlords in order to give them a better life. No, our miracle is the fullness of our God sharing in our own humanity, in order to be for us God's divine love in our flesh. Indeed, the Son of God took on sin and death, letting the powers of this world crucify him and kill him, only to rise to new life.

This miracle is shared with us because the Son of God, fully one with the Father and Spirit, became our mediator, sharing our flesh, and making our flesh – our insignificant selves – worthy of his inheritance. This is not because of what we have done, but because of who he is and what he did. Indeed, by this miracle, the Holy Spirit of God lives in us and among us, and it empowers us. Yes, some with great gifts you cannot ignore, but for most of us, our powers are the gifts of faith, hope and love, available to all and put to work in the ordinary skills and talents we have as we endure the challenges of this life.

Like Abuela, I think we often dismiss those without great gifts, including ourselves, simply because we look out and think that great gifts will instantly end hardship. We think that if we just had the right powers we could end suffering, end war, bring peace and justice ourselves. Right now.

Yet, there was One who in our flesh controlled the weather, who healed the sick, who prophesied the future. He showed us the power of true strength being the same One who made all things, who hears our every word then and now. He also, despite being God, became one of us shapeshifting into our form fully. Yet we know that he still suffered and he still died for us, as one of us. He was every superpower we could imagine, yet his suffering and ours is not to be compared to his glory and the glory we will share.

In the movie, their house, which is filled with the magic and animated by the magic, is crumbling as the power of the miracle weakens and after saving Mirabel. It seems destroyed, until Mirabel, alongside her now powerless relatives, and the many people of the village, all come together to rebuild the home. They make a new creation, made by people working in faith, hope, and love. The miracle is restored, but we see its power go out into all the village at the end of the movie.

Now, I'm not one of the writers of the movie, but I don't think that means everyone gets special gifts and magical powers. I believe is meant to show that every person bears a piece of the miracle, just as every one of us bears a piece of the miracle of Christ through the Spirit in us and among us. They bear a piece not by virtue of new supernatural talents, but by virtue of who they are and what God has given them – without earning it.

My sisters and brothers, like Casita, creation groans in the suffering of labor. Creation is with us in our challenges and our hardships, and in the suffering we see in this world and wish would just end. It is not supernatural powers that will make everything right in an instant, but the faith, hope, and love of our God working in and through is, in our ordinary selves. This is just as our God came down into our flesh, suffered and died for us, rising again for us. By this the inheritance of eternal life is shared with us.

Rather than expecting to control the miracle of grace that is our Lord Jesus, let us instead put our hope in what we do not yet see – the new creation in full – and do our part, led by the Spirit, to use our ordinary talents, as siblings who love each other and bound by our shared faith in our God, our hope in God's promises, and love poured out by God's Spirit.

Each and every one of you is loved by God, the Father in whom you find your name, your identity, and you value, because your God, in the Son shared in your humanity, not because you or I earned it, but Christ died while we were all still sinners. Yes, we look back at our sins and we should confess, or tell the truth about them, but we also repent, turning from our sins to let our minds be changed. God's love is then shared by the Spirit, the giver of life, which pours love in our hearts so it might flow from us, into the world to make it a better place.

Friends, Paul spoke to a church in the midst of change, and his words speak to us today. We remain in a church in the midst of change, in a world in the midst of change, and trying to control this world or this change, will never, ever work. It never has. Rather, let us take our cue from the Apostle and see our foundation. Let's go back to the root of who we are – children of God by our faith and by God's faithfulness to us – and let that be our guide to recognizing our own value, and the value of every person made in God's image.

In doing so, we know we are loved and we share the love of God, in the gift or grace of our Lord Jesus, and fellowship or common life we have in and through the Spirit, as children, heirs of God's life, love and promise. Amen.