

Rooted and Established in Love

Ephesians 3:14-21

Wayne Eberly
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Today we are honoring our Early Learning Center, which is celebrating their 50th Anniversary. It was fun to learn some background on the beginnings of our ELC from Sandi Dinwoodie.

In 1971 Nancy Morris Schilke and I were asked to run a program for three years old children at Dunn's Corners Community Church, Presbyterian. We each had a three year old child, so we decided we would meet once a week. Our objective was to offer a free 2 ½ hour class to let the three year olds learn to interact with their peers, and two adults who were not their parents. We had playtime, craft time, and snack time. We always ended in a circle, holding hands, and said a short prayer.

We did this until 1978. We brought our own three year olds, and later, when Nancy had a baby, she brought her in a carriage. When my husband and I adopted a baby girl, she came to the program. It was very rewarding to be able to do this for our church and the community. We are still reminded of those lives we touched, when one "our kids" or their parents, comes up to us to say they remember us. Donna Bewlay then took over the program.

Jesus said the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, so tiny in its beginning but growing to provide shelter and protection. From the mustard seed of a couple of moms and a class where three year olds played, had craft time, and shared a snack, our ELC blossomed and grew and has reached many lives over the course of 50 years. Today we pause to say thanks to all who helped ELC accomplish this life changing mission. What a blessing it has been.

Sandi said in the early days the kids would be in a circle, holding hands, and saying a short prayer. More than 50 years later, in a world where much has changed, some things thankfully remain the same. Last week I was invited to read a story to the children in our ELC. Sure enough, they were all sitting in a circle. There was a good group of children, maybe 15, maybe 20. The way they found their place in the circle was there was a big card that had their name on it. The cards were arranged in a circle. If I understood the children, every day the cards are set up in a different order, so they never know exactly where they will be sitting. But they know they will have a place. Their name will always be somewhere in the circle. Why? Because each child belongs. Each child has a place. That's also like the kingdom of heaven.

We don't always get it right with children. Sometimes we forget they belong. Sometimes we forget they have a place. Sometimes we forget these things. It happened to the disciples. Matthew 19 tells us of an embarrassing episode for the disciples. "Little children were brought to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked those who brought them." Ouch. The disciples rebuked those who brought children to Jesus. Were the children not important? Were the children a bother? Did the children disrupt some plan the disciples had to let the really important people in to see Jesus? Whatever their reason, they were wrong. Jesus saw this happening and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." And then he placed his hands on them. From the earliest days of our ELC, children have been welcomed. Children have belonged. Hands have been placed on the children to bless them. And hands have been held, forming a circle, a circle where each and every child belongs.

It seems Jesus went out of his way to demonstrate that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the little children. And as he did that, our understanding of what it means to be a little child of God is stretched and expanded and broadened and deepened. Because of Jesus we know that:

- Someone who has something as obvious as an ugly skin condition is a child of God. They belong.
- Someone who has something secret, something hidden, something hurtful, something shameful, something painful, that person is a child of God. They belong.
- Someone whose legs don't work quite right is a child of God. They belong.
- Someone who has been battling demons, demons that have chained them up in a prison of torment and failure is a child of God. They belong.
- Someone whose occupation and reputation have made them an outcast, a despised person, is a child of God, and Jesus fiercely defends them by saying, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call righteous, I have come to call sinners." Good news sinners and outcasts and tax collectors and heathens. You belong. Or if we understand the meaning of what Jesus said, "We belong," for all of us have sinned and fallen short of what God intended.

What Jesus said and did demonstrates just how high and long and deep and wide is the love of God. That is what Paul was writing about in Ephesians. You can't put the love of God in a box. Nothing in this world can confine or constrain the love of God. We will never completely understand how wide and long and deep is the love of Christ. People wanted to put limits on how the love of Christ. The disciples tried to keep the children away. The religious leaders tried to keep the tax collectors and sinners away. The demons tried to keep the possessed away. The devil would be happy if he could keep us all away. In fact it seems the devil will try anything and everything to make us believe we could never belong to God, But Jesus goes to the farthest limits, and then

beyond, to bring his love. Because his love knows no limit, children can sit in a circle in a little classroom in a corner of our church, on a card that has their very own name written on it, and they can know they belong. Because his love knows no limit, people like you and me can sit on a tiny pew in the sanctuary of a church tucked into the corner of an itty bitsy state named Rhode Island and know there is a place for us...we can know that we belong.

When we begin to grasp even the smallest measure of this immense love, of this love that is higher and wider and deeper and longer than we could ever imagine, it really is simply amazing. We find ourselves caught up in the wonder of the psalmist, who wrote, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast." If you listened carefully while this psalm was read for us just a few minutes ago in our worship service, perhaps you noticed that the psalmist was not only overwhelmed at the breadth of God's love, he was caught up in the intimacy. "You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful." God knows us, each one of us, intimately. Personally. Uniquely. Individually. We are his. We do belong because each one of us is made in the image of God.

If we all felt that and understood that and embraced that and lived into the fullness of that, life would be good. But somehow we find ourselves feeling estranged from God. We question whether we truly do belong. We doubt that our lives make a difference. We find it hard to believe that a God who is great and mighty and all powerful would actually take notice of the small and seemingly insignificant lives we lead. It is hard to believe in the sanctity of life when we live in a world that doesn't exhibit a reverence for life. Add to that is the deep discouragement we encounter when we fail, when we fall short of what God desires for us, when selfishness, anger, pride, jealousy, bitterness, greed, idolatry, adultery, and a variety of other human foibles consume our lives and it is natural for us to wonder if we really do belong. Does God have a place for us when we certainly haven't done much to earn or deserve having a place?

But just when we begin to let questions and doubts creep in and convince us we could never really belong, Jesus goes into the home of a Pharisee, a person who worked pretty hard on following the rules and doing the right thing. Unfortunately, some people, when they follow the rules and do the right thing, they start to treat others who have made some mistakes like they don't belong. So there is Jesus having dinner with the Pharisee when a woman who had made some mistakes came into the home of the Pharisee. Apparently her mistakes were well known, for certainly the Pharisee knew all about her past. He looked at her and he judged her and wanted to make sure she knew she didn't belong. That is such a familiar story for so many people, the deep seated

shame and rejection of being treated like you don't belong. Except Jesus won't let that story play out. Not on his watch. The woman bathes his feet with her tears and anoints his feet and wipes them dry with her hair, all the while being judged by the Pharisee. But Jesus is not judging her. Jesus accepts her. Jesus welcomes her. Jesus assures her she is forgiven. Jesus tells her she belongs. Oh, how wide and long and deep and high is the love of Christ.

The Bible is really a beautiful story. From the beginning when humans were created in the image of God to the great rescue of the people when they were beaten down as slaves in Egypt we have been on a journey of discovering how wide and long and deep and high is the love of God. God was with David in the valley of Elah when he faced off against Goliath and God was with Elijah on the top of Mount Carmel when he did battle with the prophets of Baal. He led them into the Promised Land and then brought them back home after the bitter years of the exile. All the while God was keeping the promise he made when he said, "I will never leave you, I will never forsake you." Or as the psalmist asked, "Where can I go to flee from your presence?" The answer is nowhere. There is nowhere we can go that God is not already there. And because he is there we are known, for he knows the cattle on a thousand hills, he knows the number of hairs on our head, he knows us each like a shepherd knows his sheep, he knows us by name.

Just like the kids in ELC have big cards with their names on it, God knows us by name. We belong. God might not walk around with a card that has your name on it, but he done something more meaningful than we could ever hope for or imagine. In Isaiah 49, a passage where the people were wrestling with fears of being abandoned, a passage clouded with the disappointment of the exile, a passage where Israel was wondering if maybe in all the drama God had forgotten them, if maybe they didn't really belong after all, God says, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne?" Maybe a mother might forget. But God says, "Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands." Engraved on the palms of his hands. Isn't that an interesting image. Is it our names on the palms of his hands? I don't know, but somehow you and I and each of God's precious children are engraved on the palms of his hands. Knowing what happened to the palms of his hands, the nails that pierced the palms of his hands, there really couldn't be a more poignant way to assure he knows us, he loves us, he died for us, he will never let go of us. That's how we know we belong.

The Apostle Paul must have had a deep appreciation for the gift of belonging, of being known by God, of being loved by God. He was once an enemy of God, of Jesus Christ. He persecuted the followers of Jesus Christ. He had blood on his hands. But this love of Jesus Christ is so wide, so long, so deep, so very high, it reached one who was even an enemy of Christ, and wrapped him the arms of love. We can almost see Jesus extending his hand to Paul and Paul seeing it, right there, on the palms of his hands, his very own name. It is this Paul, who experienced the blessing of knowing he belonged,

who now prays that others, who now prays that everyone would come to have that same experience. He wants everyone everywhere to experience the love of God that surpasses understanding.

That feels right to me. If you have experienced the gift of belonging, you want others to experience that gift. If you have a name card in the circle at ELC, you want to make sure every other kids has a name card. If you have found a place in a church family, you want others to find a place in a church family. If you have experienced the love of God that is wide and long and deep and high, you want others to have that same experience.

Both Julie and I have experienced that love and we find great meaning and purpose in sharing that love with others. Of all the people we have wanted to experience the love of God, we have especially wanted our four children to know how wide and long and deep and high God's love is. We wanted them to know they belonged. And we hoped and prayed they would then be part of helping others experience God's love.

Next Saturday we will be in Houston, Texas for the wedding of our oldest child, Jacob Wayne Eberly. As Jake's wedding has approached we have spent a lot of time thinking back on his life, on who he is, on how he has grown, on what has been important to him. Jake was a typical teenager, and there was a long stretch where he wanted to be cool. He didn't want to walk to high school even though we lived about a hundred yards from the school. So when the girl across the street, a senior in high school, offered to give him a ride to school in her red convertible, he leapt at the offer. He worked about a mile from our house, but he would be so put out if he had to walk to or home from work. So it is hard to describe what a lasting impact it made when Jake came walking home from work one day. He came home with a cart from his work that they were giving away. He didn't need a cart, so we couldn't figure out why he brought it home. We were working with some refugees from Sudan at the time, young boys who had to flee from the civil war in their country, and they were now resettled in Houston. Jake had made good friends with several of the Sudanese refugees, who were called The Lost Boys. The boys had to move a lot, and so when they were giving away the cart, Jake latched onto it. And then he pushed the cart home, walking a mile, along a busy street, all the world staring at him, not the coolest thing in the world for a high school student. But he wanted the Lost Boys to know that even though they had come from the other side of the world, they had found a home. They had a place where they belonged.

When he had been out of high school a few years a friend of his died suddenly. It was a heartbreaker. The tears that were shed at the memorial service just flowed and flowed and flowed. A little while later the young man who died, his birthday came around. Without making a big deal about it, Jake stopped by the house of his friend who died. He sat for a couple of hours talking with the mom and dad. Something inside caused him to step into a place of sadness and just offer some comfort, some care, some concern. As a parent, as a father, there isn't really anything else I would want for my

son, then for him to reach out to Lost Boys from Sudan or the grieving parents of his friend, so they might get an experience of just how wide and long and deep and high is the love of God.

Jake is our oldest child, and being parents was a brand new experience for us. We did okay as parents, but with him being our first, we weren't very good at putting him to bed. If he cried, we would rush into his room and pick him up and sing to him and sometimes climb into bed and lay with him, all the while hoping he would quickly fall back asleep. It got to the point where we weren't getting much sleep, and after a while we started devising plans for him to sleep on his own. One night I had a long talk with him about how important it was for him to fall asleep, to sleep on his own, for mommy and daddy...especially daddy...to get a good night's sleep. So I told him he had to sleep all by himself. That he couldn't call for us. That he was a big boy and he could do it. When I saw how sad his face was, I gave him one out. I said you can only call us if you are lonely. I kissed him, said our prayers, sang one final song, and then I tip toed to bed. Everything was perfect. He didn't say a word. I could feel myself drifting almost immediately to sleep. Success! And then this little voice called out from his bedroom. "Daddy, I'm onely. I'm onely" I'm sure I broke every rule in parenting, but when he said he was lonely, I slipped in and held him tight.

Probably not the most effective parenting. But then I think about a passage in the Bible where Jesus says that if people like me, human fathers, if we know how to care for our children, to love our children, to try to protect our children, to give good gifts to our children, if we as human fathers and mothers know how to do some good things for our children, how much more does the Father in heaven know how to care for us,, to hold us, to protect, and to love us.

What I'm saying is when the night is darkest, when the storms are raging, when your heart is breaking, when the sadness fills your soul, when the tears roll down your face, and when you cry out to God, to your Father in Heaven, to the one whom you can call Abba, Daddy, when you cry out, "Daddy, I'm onely, I'm onely," he will be there. There is no place you can go where God is not already there. And when he comes to you, when he grabs you, when he hugs you, when he holds you, he does it with his heavenly hands, the hands that bear the marks of his love, the hands that have your name engraved on them. Friends, hear the good news. You belong to God. And he will never leave you. Never. That's just the way it is with a God whose love is so high and long and deep and wide that it is always more than you can ask for or imagine.