

The Living Spirit- God Doesn't Just Love You
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
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Ezekiel 37: 1 – 14

1The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." 4Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. 5Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD."

7So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. 9Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." 10I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

11Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' 12Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD.

Acts 2: 1 – 21

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs--in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power."

12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" 13 But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." 14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. 16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 17 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. 18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. 19 And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. 20 The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. 21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.

In her book entitled “The Language of Letting Go” Melody Beattie tells a story about one day, when she and her mother were working together in the garden. They were transplanting some plants for the third time. Grown from seed in a small container, the plants had been transferred to a larger container; then into the garden. Now, because Melody was moving, they were transplanting them again.

Inexperienced as a gardener, Melody turned to her green-thumbed mother and asked, “Isn’t this bad for them? Won’t it hurt these plants, being uprooted and transplanted so many times?”

Her mother replied, “Oh no. Transplanting doesn’t hurt them. In fact, it’s good for the ones that survive. That’s how their roots grow strong. Their roots will grow deep, and they’ll make strong plants.”¹

The Christian journey is all about establishing strong roots in our faith, going deep into the grace that is our very sustenance. Roots. Strong roots. How do we do this? By transplanting. By getting out of our normal settings and routines and circumstances, and actively choosing those things that God wants for us. The Christian journey is all about establishing strong roots in faith. About deepening, strengthening growth.

Sometimes spiritual growth happens by choice, sometimes when it happens to us, it’s the last thing in the world that we want. Whatever the cause, spiritual growth happens when we step outside of whatever is our “normal” and consider anew exactly where, exactly in whom, our lives are rooted.

Today is the celebration of Pentecost. The birthday of the church. When we wear red. And consider the ways in which the Holy Spirit calls us out of the rooms that have been our dwelling places, out into the world, where through the arrival of the Holy Spirit, there is no Yanny or Laurel² but only Good News proclaimed and new life in Christ embraced. Through Grace.

Which also makes today a perfect day to recognizing our graduating High School Seniors, Anna, Hallie, and John.

And for me to take a few moments to talk with the youth of this congregation. The children and youth who are, as Amy K. frequently reminds us, are more than the future of the church, they are the present of the church.

And even though I’ve been here less than two years, what I want the children and youth of this congregation to know is that they, you, are amazing. I am so, so grateful that you are a part of this church and this family in faith. And that I get to be your pastor.³

¹ Kephra Burns and Susan L. Taylor. Confirmation. New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1997. Page 263.

² The New York Times, May 15, 2018 “Laurel or Yanny? What We Heard From the Experts,” by Maya Salam and Daniel Victor <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/15/science/yanny-laurel.html>

“An audio file has friends, family members and office mates questioning one another’s hearing, and their own. Is the voice saying ‘Yanny’ or ‘Laurel?’”..... “Patricia Keating, a linguistics professor and the director of the phonetics lab at U.C.L.A., said: ‘It depends on what part (what frequency range) of the signal you attend to. I have no idea why some listeners attend more to the lower frequency range while others attend more to the higher frequency range,’ she added. ‘Age? How much time they spend talking on the phone?’”

³ This section quotes directly and is adapted in other places from a letter written by the Rev. Dr. Pendleton Peery, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, NC. *Pen read this letter to FPC Youth during the service on*

I believe it is important to take this time to talk about the really important things.
 Because sometimes (too often, if I'm being truthful)
 we grown-ups don't talk about the really important things.

We get distracted by thinking that we are in control of our lives,
 and often think that we need to be in control of your lives.
 Because we love you. And we want great things for you.

But that's not what is most important.

You know—I hope—that God loves you. But that's just part of it.
 What is most important is that you know that
 God doesn't just love you—but that God likes you—God delights in you.
 And not because of what you do—but because of who you are.

Maybe that's obvious, and maybe you've heard it said before,
 but it can't be repeated enough.

I also know that you live under a lot of pressure.

 School, social media, figuring out relationships—with friends, family,
 girlfriends/boyfriends, where you fit into the world, what you want to do, who you want to
 be.

There's loads more for you to manage in your teenage years
 than there was almost 30 years ago when I was your age.

And I know what pressure does to people—
 because I know what it does to me.

It can make us feel anxious; that pit you carry in your stomach when it feels like
 whatever you do, it's not enough;
 where you feel like who you are as a person—
 what you are worth, whether you will be successful,
 whether you will live up to your parents' expectations,
 whether or not you will be liked or loved—
 depends on doing well all of the things that are stressing you out.

And saying things like, “don't worry.” Or “don't stress out,”
 is maybe the least helpful advice we can give.

And here, I should admit that I owe you an apology.

Because part of what I think is causing you stress is something that your parents and I helped
 to create. And to be fair to us, our parents (and your grandparents) helped create it, too.

*Sunday, October 15, 2017. Pen and I are members of the same lectionary study group, “The Well.” I have used this
 with his permission. At his request I did not mention his name in the sermon [http://www.firstpres-
 charlotte.org/dear-fpc-youth-letter-pen/](http://www.firstpres-charlotte.org/dear-fpc-youth-letter-pen/)*

And, to be fair to them, it's really something that has been in the works for a long time.

I'm afraid we've helped create an environment where you are defined
 by the very things that stress you out: what you look like, how well you do at school,
 how you compare to other people your age, what career you will choose, how you manage your
 public image, your reputation.
 And I'll tell you a little secret.
 All that stuff is what stresses us out, too.
 You probably know that—you're smart and perceptive.
 You probably watch us comparing you to other people your age.
 You watch us take our careers, our lives, too seriously—trying to get ahead.
 You watch us worry about how we are perceived by others.
 Sometimes, maybe a lot of times, your parents and I take the things that make us anxious,
 that stress us out, and we push that stuff right along to you.
 You know why? It's because we are trying to stay in control.
 Which is a devious, seductive piece of bad theology.

Some of you—many of you—are really good...exceptionally good...
 at managing all of this stress and pressure.
 And I have no doubt that most of you will sail through this next chapter of your life
 when you will graduate and go to college and launch a career
 and be successful and continue making a positive impact on the world.
 That's not a bad thing.

But I also know that even if you have the absolute,
 most smashing success you could ever hope or dream for—
 even if you live up to every expectation that somebody else has for you
 (or you have for yourself)—
 even then, there will still be a part of you that wonders if you are enough.
 Because we spend so much of our lives judging and being judged
 by our successes and against our failures.

So here is what I want to say:
 God doesn't just love you.
 God likes you. God delights in you.
 And not because of what you do. But because of who you are.

What God? The God who helps us plant deep spiritual roots that can withstand and grow
 stronger each time they are transplanted.

The God who started the church with fire and a joyful celebration,
 not indoors, but out in the world, in the streets.

The God who can take even the driest of bones and give them life, make them live.

God doesn't just love you. God likes you. God delights in you.
 And not because of what you do. But because of who you are.
 And I hope you never doubt it.

But if you do, I want you to come back to the church and I want you to walk into the sanctuary and look into the baptismal font (where you have been baptized, or where you can remember your baptism, wherever it was).

And I want you ask yourself what you did to deserve being called a child of God and someone who is worthy of being saved by Jesus Christ?

The answer is nothing. And that is what makes grace so amazing.

You are all special people.

And I know it can be tough to navigate all you have going on in your lives.

Just remember that God doesn't just love you. God likes you. God delights in you.

And not because of what you do. But because of who you are.

And your church family loves you—
just the way you are...and no matter what.

Amen.