

“Our Nurturing God”

Isaiah 9:1-4; 2 Corinthians 1:1-7

January 22, 2023

It seems hard to believe that it was way back in 1978 when Bob Seeger’s song “Feel Like a Number” first appeared on the charts. If you don’t know it, don’t worry, the title fairly well summarizes the content. In the song, Seeger laments the fact that in most of his daily interactions, people know him only impersonally, instead of as a unique, living breathing human being. And if that was the case back in ’78, what are things like now? I mean, back then, you probably knew your grocer or your mailman by name. When you called someone and they weren’t in, the phone was answered by a human and not a voicemail system. Over the last 40 years, the content of the Seeger song has proven sadly more prophetic than even he probably imagined. North American society has become less community centered and far more atomistic than ever. As a result, North American culture has become far less nurturing than ever before.

Now what do I mean when I say nurture? Nurturing in some sense, it means to feed, as in you nourish. On other occasions, it means to “bring up, or to rear” as you would a child. But nurture also carries with it the idea of care, specifically a life-long, comprehensive care which stems from a sense of devotion and love. Over the last 25 years, we’ve seen many societal methods of nurturing wiped away in the never-ceasing march “forward” wherever the heck that is. Set up to care for long-term, devoted employees in their golden years, pensions have gone the way of the dodo. Now you’re either doing something for the company or you’re out in the cold. School care has gotten progressively less nurturing as we’ve focused more on test-scores than the overall development of children. We’ve made leaps and bounds in prolonging life but we’ve done so only with skyrocketing costs. And that profiteering has given birth to a system in which patients are too frequently treated like little more than dollar signs instead of ailing human beings. The world around us has failed us utterly in the realm of nurture. But it shouldn’t surprise us. In this broken age where individualism reigns supreme, is it any wonder we’re less nurturing of others? When our primary aims center around “me myself and mine” there just can’t be the kind of community-based nurture we all so desperately need.

Fortunately, this world isn’t the alpha and the omega of our lives, Jesus Christ is. Thanks be to God we worship Him and He shows us a nurturing God – a Lord who cares for us so deeply He took on flesh and lived among us. Through the Holy Spirit, the nurturing power of God Almighty is with us every single day, every single hour. In the Bible we encounter a God who heals. Who nourishes. Who teaches. God leads a people away from dearth and into the land of milk and honey. When God’s own people stray, He corrects their behavior instead of abandoning them. God’s nature, as revealed to us in the Old Testament is one of amazing nurture of His people.

This morning we read Psalm 23, a scripture many of us know by heart. It’s so frequently read at funerals we might overlook the fact that it speaks poignantly of a God who actively cares for us. This isn’t some hidden God. This is an engaged deity. He sits us down in green pastures. He leads us beside still waters. He gives us food and drink. He restoreth our souls. God even watches over us even in the shadow of death. *God nurtures us.* Jesus Christ being fully God is the incarnate reflection of the Father. In fact, Jesus’ incarnation speaks powerfully to the extraordinary lengths to which God will go to care for us. God gets involved. He isn’t content to just foster us for us from afar, Jesus Christ arrives on earth to nurture us in the flesh. Throughout the New Testament Jesus is personally engaged with humanity. He feeds people. He educates all about the coming Kingdom, offering hope and joy. He heals men and women, laying his hands upon them, taking away their sorrow and their pain and their ostracism from their community. Our Scripture reading from the Gospel of John highlights that nurturing desire. There’s likely no act which shows more clearly the intimate nurture Jesus Christ has for humanity than when He washes His disciples’ feet.

Consider this, many of us shudder at the idea of even touching somebody else’s feet today and we certainly don’t think they’re ritually unclean as the Jews of the time did. Now we might cite the potential unsanitary elements but our refusals likely stem from something else. For the most part, we don’t want that kind of involvement in other people’s lives nor do we ultimately want them that involved in ours. We don’t want to be too close to anyone. It’s the same reason that too often we come even to church with smiles on our faces answering the question “how are you doing” with a cool “I’m fine” even when our lives feel as though they’re

careening out of control. We want distance from other people. To be too involved in another person's life or they in ours runs a risk, or so we think. Accepting nurture from another person may leave us too obligated for our liking.

And yet Jesus Christ shows us what true humanity looks like. It's engaged. It's involved. It takes risks and it doesn't shy away from people, even in the most personal of matters in their lives. It asks the question "do you need help?" not with the expectation of hearing a polite no. It asks the question with the hopeful desire to hear "yes." You and I are created in the image of this God and we're told to follow Jesus as the Way. He Himself tells us as much in our Gospel reading as He says, "*For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.*" That means is that the world isn't left bereft of a place of deep and abiding nurture. The world around us may treat us like little more than our social security numbers but the church of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit is called to be a place where all people can expect to be cared for, not as commodities, not as a means to an end, but cared for deeply as children of God. We're supposed to be the ones that take a deep interest in the lives of people around us. We're to be the people who nurture because we know that we're being eternally nurtured by a loving merciful God made known to us fully in Jesus Christ.

So how do we do it? How do we become more nurturing of others? I confess, the first step seems strange – To be a more nurturing, we've got to love ourselves. I know it seems odd to make that the starting point. But keep in mind, when I speak of this love, I'm not talking about a vain, self-focused love. Rather I mean the kind of love of self that only comes when you drink deeply from the font of living water offered to us by Jesus Christ. That living water quenches those parched places of our lives, those spots withered by sins of commission, omission or apathy. That living water washes us in a healing forgiveness and restores us back into the fellowship of God the Father.

Jesus, in the flesh, shows us we're loved by God, warts and all. Again, I come back to something I said in the first of our sermons – If we don't understand ourselves to be broken and being healed, then we don't understand how God's operating in our lives. We must be able to look at ourselves in the mirror and say essentially "I am a sinner yet I am loved nonetheless." If we don't get that, that we're loved by a good, forgiving, provident God then we'll always be focused on me and what's mine. Image trumps substance. Faith gives way to self-reliance. The end result is that we wrap ourselves tightly in self-protecting bubble wrap. No one can touch us nor will we deign to touch others. I think in some observable way, Christianity should lead us to moving away from self-focus into God-focus and finally to focus on "the other." If that isn't the overall progression in our lives or in the life of a church then I think we need to re-evaluate the contents of what we're doing individually and corporately. And I think empirical evidence in that regard can be shown in how much and how well we're nurturing others.

So I ask the question, how are we doing as individuals in nurturing others? How are we, as the body of Christ performing in nurture? *Is our church as nurturing as it can be?* In some regards, we do very well. I believe that once people are here in Sunday morning, we're very gracious, kind and concerned. But if one of our chief aims is to nurture, how are we doing about spreading the love to our members beyond Sunday morning at 10am? How are we doing at spreading the love that's here outward beyond our circle of brothers and sisters in Christ? I think we can do better.

We talked about gathering in week one of the sermon series and here we are yet again. To be honest, as a church of Jesus Christ, we can never drift too far from it. But it's important to note why we do it. We GATHER the poor, the sick, the lonely, the broken-hearted, the sinner because, ultimately, WE DESIRE MORE PEOPLE TO CARE ABOUT AND FOR! Knowing the limitless of God's love for us, we're excited at the prospect of adding to the number of people we can nurture in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Think about it like this – there are tons of people out there right now who're withering under the lack of true humanity they're experiencing in their lives. Just imagine what your life would be life without church? You'd have no place where you could be yourself and be loved by God and his community of saints. Think about if you had no one to call in a crisis. No one to pray for your health as you went into surgery? Life would be lonely, dark and filled with hunger pangs, both literal and spiritual.

As natural-born nurturers, we've got to reach out to all God's people and show them the way. We've got to reach them, feed them, touch them, teach them and heal them, all of the lost sheep. As Christians, we're to

nurture others like a mother hen. We want to put our wings over the lost, the poor, the sin-sick and the broken hearted and keep them safe and warm in the love of God as we ourselves, sinful and broken, are kept and warmed. And once they're here, we nurture everyone by assisting in their Christian education. See how all these ends of God for the church we've been discussing in this sermon series tie together? We talked about this last week. In order for us to be great nurturers, we've got to be engaged in an overall project to educate others about the glory of this merciful, wonderful, nurturing God. Nurture, after all, carries the meaning to educate and to raise. If you desire to really nurture another human being, part and parcel of that is found in your ability to speak competently and faithfully about the Triune God. Oh, and there is so much more to nurturing than that. Another way we nurture is we literally take the root meaning of the word and apply it. We nourish, we feed.

And is there still more we could be doing I wonder? I think so. Remember the basic law of congregational life - "Churches grow when they intentionally reach out to others and they die when all they do it take care of themselves." What might this church be like if we began a soup kitchen? Or what if we undertook feeding breakfast to the children in our community who, in the summer months and on vacations, have no access to subsidized food? How would those kinds of things change us for the better?

One of the great ways our church extends nurture is through our Board of Deacons. Following that early tradition recorded for us in Acts, our church is blessed with a great Board of Deacons. But to leave nurturing entirely up to them is to wrongly place our Christian duty on their shoulders. As Children of God, created in his image, every single one of us are nurturers. For lack of better words, it's in our genes. Every single day, aim to nurture your brothers and sisters in Christ. Choose a name of the church roll and just call them. Ask that risky question "do you need help" if you hear of problems and worries and respond to their needs. Invite people over to dinner. Stop by their places of work or their homes just to let them know you're thinking about them. Visit our members who're shut-ins or at long-term care facilities. Sit with another member at the doctor's office or in the hospital. Folks, as the church becomes even more nurturing than it is presently, it's amazing the lives we'll touch and the new faces that will be here learning about the Lord Jesus Christ!

Rev. Roger Nishioshka tells of a man and wife who had to move to Iowa for the husband's job. Both disliked having to go to Iowa, away from the hustle and bustle of Chicago where they were living. When they arrived, they cautiously attended a church. Now by cautiously I mean that they came on Sundays when it suited them but didn't do much beyond that. When the pastor called to ask them about becoming members, the woman said "oh we might, but we're not going to be in Iowa very long." Then, one day, that woman was diagnosed with breast cancer. The day before her chemotherapy began, she placed her name on the church's prayer list, figuring it couldn't hurt. The next day, her doorbell rang. It was one of the ladies of the church with a hot meal. A little surprised but happy nonetheless, the woman and her husband ate the meal and figured that was the end of that. A couple of days later, another unexpected ring of her doorbell. Another hot meal. Only this time, a man delivered it. "My wife sends this along with her regards. Hope you like it." "Oh, by the way, how long has your screen door been broken?" the man asked. "Since we got here," said the woman adding "my husband isn't too handy." The man nodded and she thought nothing much more of it, placing the second meal in the fridge. About an hour later, that man and another man of the church came by toting drills and wearing toolbelts. "Would it be all right if we fixed that door up?" they asked. The woman allowed it. On and on that care went until her chemotherapy was over and the doctor had pronounced her cancer in remission. That was many years ago. Guess where that family who was so anxious to get out of Iowa lives today? Well, they're still there in Iowa. When asked why, the woman said "I'll never leave Iowa, because *my church* is in Iowa."

That's the power of nurture done in the name of our Lord. It's my prayer that we continue to grow in our desire to nurture all humanity. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.