

On Being Rooted and Grounded in Love
II Samuel 11:1-15
Ephesians 3:14-21

“...that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know that love of Christ which surpasses knowledge....”

Once again, Ronan Farrow has told a story in the *New Yorker* of a man in a position of power accused of helping himself to sex with women literally working under him. It is a story of a man who began his career as an actor, then became a producer and finally was named a network executive. It is a story of a man who took CBS from last place to the most watched television network today. It is a story of a man that reminds me of another story of a man, the story of David set in the spring of the year when kings go out to battle.

That particular spring, David had decided to rest on his laurels instead of going out to battle. This shepherd become king was only thirty years old when he began to reign over all of Israel. Back then, David and his men marched into Jerusalem against the Jebusites and declared it to be the city of David. The Philistines were the next to fall. In triumph, David and his army carried the ark of God—God’s mobile dwelling place—into David’s city with David himself leaping and dancing before the Lord. His military prowess unassailable, David then makes a move to solidify his regime by domesticating God, offering God a permanent residence in his city in exchange for God’s favor. God declines the offer and instead makes a promise to David. God promises never to remove God’s steadfast love from him. It is a promise that establishes David’s house, David’s dynasty, David’s kingdom forever, a promise that means to root and ground David and Israel in the love that never ends.

“Some time afterward,” we read, “David attacked the Philistines and subdued them,” then the Moabites, the Arameans, the Ammonites, and the Edomites. Sprinkled throughout the text are press releases: “The Lord gave victory to David wherever he went” and “David won a name for himself” and “David reigned over all Israel, and David administered justice and equity to all his people.” Just before we meet David in our text today, David wages a battle of massive proportions in which “*David* killed...seven hundred chariot teams and forty thousand horsemen, and...the commander of the Aramean army.” Finally, “When *all* the kings...saw that they had been defeated by Israel, they made peace with Israel....” Therefore, *therefore*, in the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle...David remained in Jerusalem to bed the wife of one of his generals.

Why am I telling you all of this? Maybe because the times have made me a cynical reader of David’s story. According to Walter Brueggemann, writing almost three decades ago, God’s promise to David is “a statement with partisan political commitments that established not only a theological idea but also a particular form of political power.” That is to say, God’s unconditional promise to David “lives very close to self-serving ideology and may be heard as an act of royal propaganda. Particular power arrangements that benefit some at the expense of others are now legitimated and guaranteed to perpetuity *by the promise of God*. It is almost impossible to sort out in this passage what is genuine faith and what is self-serving propaganda.” But Brueggemann says, “Recognition of this ambiguity may help us to discern as well that various theological claims in our own time are heavily laden with self-serving ideology.”

I guess that is why I am telling you all of this. God’s blank check to David’s dynasty radically shifted the theological foundations of Israel. Hereafter, the actions of David or Israel are not decisive morally. That is to say, King David could do anything—could send for, lay with and impregnate the wife of Uriah the Hittite and then have Uriah killed in battle to preserve his reputation—David could do anything without jeopardizing God’s unconditional love for him and without losing the people’s unconditional support of him. I am telling you this because in this time, when self-serving ideologies are heavy laden with theological claims, our own response to God’s unconditional love in Jesus Christ is at stake day by day.

One response is to use the promise of unconditional love to justify moral license. “Moral licensing,” I learned this week, “is a particularly interesting mental glitch.” When something helps to strengthen our positive self-image, it also makes us less worried about the consequences of immoral behavior. If I am known as an advocate for women’s rights, I can be forgiven for my infidelities; a champion for racial justice—the least racist person you know—then racial slurs are neither here nor there. Given this first response, God must be in the business of giving mulligans to God’s servants. Yet it seems to me that this line of reasoning only reliably follows

if you also occupy a place of privilege and power: if you are King David or Leslie Moonves, a president or a media mogul, but also a preacher, restaurateur, office manager or doctoral advisor. It is the powerful and privileged, in large arenas and small, who believe themselves to be so above reproach that they may help themselves, pleasure themselves, satisfy themselves at will, and at the expense of insignificant others, without ultimate consequences. Moral licentiousness is one response to unconditional love.

The second response has to do with God's unconditional love *of the other* (the immigrant, the poor, the person of color), causing some to cry "foul" and double-down on the Deuteronomist's theological meritocracy: only "if" you do thus and so, will you "then" be deserving of God's love. It is a response which leads me to Mister Rogers! Fox News, in 2007, four years after his death, called Fred Rogers an evil man and blamed him for creating a generation of entitled narcissists. Instead of "telling little creeps that he liked them just the way they were," one commentator said, they should have been told, "The world owes you nothing. You have to work and compete. If you want to be special, you have to prove it." Recalling this critique in light of the current documentary on Rogers' life, a columnist in *The American Conservative* notes that "It is this crucial *theological* insight--the distinction between unconditional love and indiscriminate affirmation—that Roger's...critics perhaps have difficulty grasping. That's a shame," he says, "because although it's an insight that's easily forgotten, it's an essential one. And denouncing any talk of unconditional love as mere 'entitlement mentality' implies that the value of persons is defined solely by their useful capacity—a grimly utilitarian ethic indeed." A miserly works-righteousness is the second response to God's unconditional love for others.

But now and again you encounter someone who responds to being rooted and grounded in love with astonished humility. Often these are men and women and children who have already been humbled by life's circumstances. And yet—or maybe therefore—they respond to being loved unconditionally with lives of grace and gratitude. I think of Mary's "How can this be?" when Gabriel announced that she, a poor, single, pregnant teenager from nowhere, would be the mother of God. I think of the one leper who returned to give thanks, of the grateful laborers paid extravagantly at the end of the day, of the sinners with whom Jesus dined and of crooked Zacchaeus who did an about face. All of them had been convinced by the world that they were unworthy, even worthless, maybe losers. And I think it no coincidence that they were precisely the ones who encountered in Jesus the length and breadth and height and depth of love for which they were made.

Fred Rogers spent his life rooting and grounding the lives of children in the love that never quits, never gives up, never ends. During seminary, he had watched children's programs that demeaned the other, threw pies in children's faces to humiliate them and responded to difference with verbal violence rather than kindness. My mother would not let me watch *The Howdy Doody Show* for just that reason! "Using puppets rather than a pulpit, [Fred] preached a message of inherent worth and unconditional lovability to young viewers," a biographer writes. He believed that "the space between the television and the viewer [was] holy ground...believed he could use television 'for the broadcasting of grace through the land.' Before entering [his] office each day, Rogers would pray, 'Dear God, let some word that is heard be yours.'"

"In 1998, *Esquire* reported the story of a young viewer...with an acute case of autism. The child had never spoken a word until one day he uttered, 'X the Owl,' which was the name of one of Mister Roger's most popular puppets." This same child had never looked his father in the eye until the day his father said, "Let's go to the Neighborhood of Make-Believe" and from that day forward, the little boy began speaking and reading. Later in Roger's life, he told the story of a child who was being terribly abused by his biological parents. "Through [watching] 'Mr. Roger's Neighborhood,' the child began to hope that there were kind people in the world and became convinced that he too should be treated with respect. The child called an abuse hotline and was rescued. If the story doesn't seem exceptional enough, consider that the hotline operator who answered the phone adopted the boy." The response of astonished humility, in the third place, a life of grace and gratitude is the morally significant response of all who, in Jesus Christ, are being rooted and grounded in love.

I pray, therefore, in this mean time, that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Amen.