

So far in this series, The Tie That Binds, we've seen how we were all **formed** by God's hands and are therefore connected to Him as His children...that we're all **woven** together and part of a larger whole...that Jesus was God's love **poured** out for us, modeling kindness and love to all who needed it.

Today's theme is "Lifted", in which we seek to emulate how Jesus always lifted up those who were put down.

I thought of my sister as I began writing this sermon, and as it happens, she's actually in town visiting me this weekend. I thought of her in regards to lifting others up because she's trained in something called the Nurtured Heart approach, which is a set a strategies and really, an overall philosophy for creating and maintaining healthy relationships in your life. Most often, it's used between adults, such parents or educators, and children, but ultimately it can be used in any interaction between two people.

The basic tenet of the approach is that there is greatness in everybody. No matter what mistakes someone has made, no matter their current behavior, there is greatness in everyone. And as Christians, is that not what we believe? We believe that we are all created in the image and likeness of God, who is great. Jesus even said to his disciples that anyone who believes in Him will do works as great as His and more.

So the approach believes that there is greatness in everyone, and its goal is to act in such a way that we embody our own greatness, **by helping others embody theirs.**

And it does this by using what it calls the Three Stands, which are:

1. Absolutely NO – meaning you give no energy to negativity or to unwanted behaviors.
2. Absolutely YES – meaning you actively give energy to positivity and to desired behaviors.
3. Absolute clarity – meaning you set and maintain rules and boundaries for behavior.

Basically, the approach means rather than criticizing, tearing down, or bashing people for the mistakes they've made or for what you perceive as negative attributes or behaviors, you instead always seek to focus on, recognize, and honor positive behaviors, no matter how minor or seemingly insignificant. Because just as we can always find something to criticize, we can also always find something to appreciate or celebrate – it's a matter of seeking it out. Because we tend to see what we look for.

The reason I bring this up is that I think that this Nurtured Heart Approach is a perfect way to try to emulate Jesus, to do as He did. Consider how He lifted up and honored others who most people looked down upon.

In Luke chapter 7, Jesus visits the house of a Pharisee, and while he's there, a woman, who is known to live a sinful life, comes to him and kneels in front of him, crying tears which land on his feet. She dries His feet with her hair and pours perfumed oil on them. The Pharisee is aghast that Jesus would let such a sinner touch him, but Jesus explains how her actions in that moment show her care and love and faith – she came to him, wept, washed and perfumed his feet, in contrast to the Pharisee who hasn't even offered Jesus any water to wash up. Jesus lifts her up by defending her to the Pharisee and the other guests, saying her faith has saved her.

In Mark chapter 12, Jesus observes the large offerings of money made by the rich at the temple, and then sees a widow who offers only two small coins. He lifts her up to his disciples by explaining that her contribution, while seemingly small, is far greater than that of the others because it's truly a sacrifice, being all the money she has.

In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus tells the story of a man beaten and left half-dead by robbers at the side of the road. A priest sees him and passes him by, as does a Levite – these were examples of the righteous men of the time. Then a Samaritan man comes by, takes pity on him, cleans him and bandages his wounds, brings him to an inn and pays for his care. After telling this story, Jesus asks which of the three men was a neighbor to the man in need, and the

man he was speaking to replies “the one who had mercy on him”. And Jesus responds “go and do likewise”. Now, Samaritans were hated, despised by the Jews of the time. For Jesus to portray a Samaritan as the hero of a story, the one who showed mercy and kindness, the one Jesus wants us to emulate, particularly when the righteous men, the priest and the Levite, did not, is just another example of Jesus lifting up someone who others looked down upon.

Jesus often told people to get up and sin no more – He inspired them to greatness by believing in their inherent goodness. Now, maybe it was a little easier for him, being the son of God and all, being able to forgive people’s sins – so maybe our words need to be different. But it seems that perhaps those words of encouragement were all those people needed to hear for once – not that they were a sinner and good for nothing, but that there was the possibility of change and redemption, that they didn’t need to be what they were seen as, that their past did not dictate their future. Maybe they just needed someone who believed that they could be good, that they had greatness inside of them.

For years – decades really – I thought of myself as not being able to sing. I recall being made fun of and teased in junior high and high school when I tried to sing solo. And for years, I stopped trying altogether, and I only sang under my breath in the car, or when no one was around. But I couldn’t ignore the desire to be good at it, or how much fun I found it, so eventually I started singing with a small church group. And when we lost our cantor, well, I was the only one willing to give it a try.

So it was around that time that I signed up for an introductory lesson with a voice teacher. I told her that I knew I wasn’t great or anything, I just wanted to learn how to control my breath better, and maybe gain 2-3 notes at the top of my range to make a few songs a little easier for me to sing.

We had a half-hour trial lesson during which she asked me to match pitch, and we did scales and exercises. And I remember she kept asking me whether I really had never had any voice lessons and I insisted, I really truly hadn't.

By the end, she sat me down and said, you have what it takes to be a singer. I don't know why no one else has told you this before now. You have a lot to learn, yes, but I can teach you.

And really, that was all I needed to hear to really start trying. I just needed someone to tell me, yes, you can do this and you can be good at it. I started lessons right away, and she continued encouraging me, breaking down my old self-beliefs and replacing them with new ones, assuring me that I had greatness in me. It was her believing in me that inspired me to work hard, try my best, and develop the talent that it turned out, I'd had all along, and I just hadn't believed it.

Words can harm, or words can heal. We can use our words to tear each other down, or use them to lift each other up. The paradox, the miracle, is that when we make the choice to lift others up, we lift ourselves as well. In helping others find their greatness, we embody our own. Just like in the story I read to the children, when we choose to fill up others' buckets, we fill our own buckets, too.

Because being kind, nurturing, loving, and encouraging to others, choosing to lift them up and inspiring them to greatness, brings us into our own greatness. We are not standing in greatness when we tear others down on Facebook for having opinions that differ from our own...or when we disparage our kids for making questionable choices...or when we tease people in a way that hurts their feelings.

But when we choose to seek out the good in someone and recognize positivity, we are lifting up both others and ourselves. We can choose to ignore the fact that the cup of juice got knocked over for the fifth time this week and instead praise the child who quickly ran to get a towel to clean it up, for being quick-thinking, proactive, and helpful. We can look past the fact that our

colleague's work report had some grammatical errors in it – I know, that's a hard one for me too – and instead praise all the hard work, research, and thought that went into the project. We can ignore the fact that our partner loaded the dishwasher in a way that we would NOT have done, and instead thank and recognize them for tidying up the kitchen.

When we make these kinds of choices, we are choosing to give someone praise, to help them feel good about themselves, to give them a little glow of pride and satisfaction – and in doing so, we are being kind, generous, patient, and encouraging. And if that's not great, I don't know what is!

It takes practice to unlearn old habits and to create new ones. And if you're a perfectionist like me, it can be REALLY hard to overlook people's mistakes or ignore the areas where they fall short in your eyes, and instead look for and praise the sometimes VERY small ways that they've done something right.

But it is well worth trying to do, because by doing so, we help lead others to step into their God-given greatness – and we step into our own as well.