

## **Our Inheritance**

Rev. John Allen

If you have never heard me say it before, hear me say it now. God loves you. No matter what.

This basic truth is the one thing I would want anyone who is a part of this church to believe.

It is my hope for our children.

It is my hope for our youth.

It is my hope for each one of you.

To come to believe, deep in your bones, that God love you. No matter what.

A few weeks ago I was at a meeting of the Milton Substance Abuse Coalition and a few High School students had come.

They were there to offer their candid assessment and to help us older adults better understand the world of our town's youth.

Two of the four were youth from our church: Arielle Solomon and Alyssa Foster.

Throughout the evening our youth spoke eloquently about the stress and depression so many of their peers face. I was really impressed with these young women who are offering leadership not just among their peers, but to this whole community.

What broke my heart though as I listened to them was hearing the extent to which our children have received the message that their value, their worth, as people, is encapsulated on their report cards, and made known only in college acceptance letters.

And this is not the first time I have heard this about our kids, and from our kids.

Somehow, somewhere along the line, the academic pressure has gotten so heaped up on our kids that they have begun to internalize a message that they have to earn their place in the world through extraordinary achievement.

I don't think anyone did this on purpose. But we have to face the result.

Whatever we are doing, it's a problem.

For me, a great measure of my commitment to finding solutions for the crisis of mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of our youth is rooted in my own experience.

During my Junior Year at Needham High School, I lost 4 classmates to suicide.

It became such a regular occurrence in our little community that it was declared an epidemic, and experts flew in from around the country to help us find a way to stem the tide, and find a way forward.

After a long community process, their recommendations were actually fairly simple. We were too stressed. We had come to believe that our scores on each test were quite literally a matter of life or death. We had lost the ability to see ourselves as worthy of love and life unless we earned it with an A.

But it wasn't simply that a couple bad grades. Our community had created a culture that inadvertently exacerbated depression, feelings of worthlessness, and feelings of helplessness.

Our Principal took this diagnosis to heart and looked for solutions. One of the first things he did was decide to stop publishing the school's honor roll in the newspaper, recognizing that the document was being used as a sort of public accounting, and parents were pushing their children to appear on this list for the sake of their own reputations in the community.

For this simple change, he was derided by Rush Limbaugh on his radio show, mocked by Jay Leno on the Tonight Show, and he received hate mail from all over the country.

For their part, a group of parents in our community bought ad space in the paper and printed the name of anyone who would send them a copy of their report card indicating that their children had the grades.

The next agenda for our principal was to introduce research tested methods of stress reduction into our school day. We had occasionally scheduled homework free nights, and yoga and meditation replaced dodgeball in our gym class.

For this, he was encouraged to resign, and ultimately did, moving his family out of the community before his children were school aged, citing in part a desire to raise them in a different culture.

And while this culture of competition, ranking, and achievement has fairly dramatic impacts on our children, I am not so sure that we ever quite overcome it even as adults.

Instead we continue to constantly compare ourselves to others, or worse to some idealized standard in a magazine advertisement, or to the perfect-looking life of that friend on facebook.

Most of us never learn how to derive a sense of self-value and self-worth that does not depend on our test-scores, or our waistline, or our salary.

Instead we run around comparing ourselves to impossible standards, and predictable we find ourselves wanting.

Which is why, in a world like this, I think the most important thing for us to say, over and over is:

God loves you. No matter what.

No matter what you did. No matter what you believe. No matter what you earn. No matter how many of your dreams came true. No matter where you go to college. No matter what.

In our reading today, Paul calls that love and grace from God. Our inheritance.

Which is an important choice of word. Our inheritance, glorious grace that God has freely bestowed on us, the Beloved.

Our inheritance.

That is, what we receive not by the virtue of any merit. Nothing we have to earn, but a gift, freely given, simply because we are all God's children.

God's love does not need to be earned, or achieved. It is a gift. Given to you, just because of who you are to God.

And if we could all really take that into our heart, than we would all at least have one place to look for our value and our worth that did not depend on anything else.

A place we could turn to feel our inherent value even when every other source on earth fails us. A place where we might turn in our deepest hopelessness to hold onto the truth that each one of us has value that depends on nothing more than that we are God's beloved children.

It's our inheritance. Love. Grace. Forgiveness. Hope.

Our inheritance. God's gift. Given freely. To you. To me. To every person.

Back at that substance abuse coalition meeting, one of the adults in the room asked the high school students, what we could do as adults in the community, to help the stress, the pressure, and the depression.

One of the youth waved for the microphone, took it, and told everyone about this church. About our youth group. About the difference it had made for her, and her sense that it was a model of the sort of space her peers needed.

A place where they could just be. Where they could be honest and vulnerable. Where no one expected too much.

A place to hear the simple truth, that none of us can hear enough.

God loves you. No matter what.

At the heart, that is really what we do here.

Sure, we repair this historic building, its cracked windows, and leaky gutters. Not so that we can maintain a monument, but so that we have a building where people of all ages can come and hear someone say. "God loves you."

We run a Sunday School, not so that you can all listen to a sermon without having to worry about keeping an eye on the kids, but so that each of those kids grows up knowing deep down that God loves them, no matter what.

We run a youth group, not just to keep kids out of trouble, but to give them a place where they can come to hear again that they are worthy of love, and they receive God's love, no matter what.

God loves you. No matter what.

Not because of anything you have done.

Simply because of who God is.

It's our inheritance. A gift.

Listen to me: God loves you. No matter what.