

(RE)ORIENTATION

Romans 8:18-39

Intro

So, I don't know if you've heard...but apparently school is back in session?

Yeah, our family was more than a little excited as well.

Now that doesn't mean that there haven't been a few mentions of, 'I'm still sleeping' as the morning starts right around 6 AM to get on the bus (and no, that comment was not made by either of the parents...regardless of how true it may be!)...but each and every day the students in the Nace/Gabriel household have come home excited about the day that just was.

The thing is, I know that the bubble that I live in is a very fortunate one, because there are more than a few kids for whom school is...not the best experience.

And it was that reality, in addition to the fact that schools are just getting started in our local area, that we felt led to create a worship opportunity where we are able to come together as a community of faith and pray for our kids in specific, but very much all the children and schools that are a part of our greater community.

Now, in regard to that whole, 'not the best experience' assertion, here are some statistical truths: High school students today have more anxiety symptoms and are twice as likely to see a mental health professional as teens in the 1980s.; suicide is the third leading cause of death for kids ages 10-24 (experiencing a dramatic uptick in statistics from 11.1 deaths per 100,000 teens in 2013 to 13.1 per 100,000 teens in 2016...and it keeps going up); the number of teens each year who have had a depressive episode is up 37 percent between 2005 and 2014; and, statistically speaking, within the next month (and this is self-reporting), 35% of all high schoolers will drink some alcohol, 21% will binge drink, 22% will ride in someone's car whose been drinking, and 10% will drive after drinking.

I am sure that at least some of these numbers are due to the fact that, comparably speaking, our society has become much more comfortable talking about these issues, or at the very least reporting them...which is equally disconcerting because most of us are able to acknowledge how difficult it still is to talk about, let alone deal with, these sorts of issues: we're horrible at it.

And those numbers have only tangentially touched upon the drug addiction issue, and I am specifically speaking to the opioid epidemic, that is rampant throughout the country, and absolutely in our community as well with nearly 25% of all high schoolers using at least 1 illegal drug (and no, that does not include marijuana).

Do you hear why we are talking about this?

Because we need to pray for our children.

Because we need to pray for our schools.

Because, as we talked about last week, God has told us that we don't need to worry, but in order to make sure that the difficulties that are a part of our lives do not take center stage so as to become full-fledged worry, we have to lean upon God, we have to lean upon one another by coming together.

We have to.

Because if we do not, the voices that are whispering ever louder into our children's lives that 'something is wrong with them', that 'they are so screwed up that they can't be loved', will be listened to at rates that will be equally breathtaking and heartbreaking (as if they aren't there already).

So with all of that lead up, where do we go? As people of faith, we are called to remind ourselves of how God leads and directs. Not so shockingly, there is not a particular passage that relates directly to the subject matter I've rolled out there...but there is a passage that speaks heartily to the voices that are able to whisper ever louder.

We have an idea of what our kids our hearing in regard to themselves because of how they are responding.

Now hear what God whispers, both for them, and for all. The scripture reads this way.

Romans 8:26-38

26 The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

28 We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

31 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³²He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? ³³Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

'(re)Orientation'

The idea to have a sermon where we talked about praying for our children and our schools was a seed that was planted back in the spring. The thought was this: there are so many pressures that are leaning on our kids (to that point: as I was writing this on Wednesday, there was a headline that came across my newsfeed that said, 'FDA declares youth vaping an epidemic'). I totally get that there hasn't been a time

in our history when the reality of life wasn't applying pressure on children (look through history and that becomes abundantly clear).

But there's something about the way that our kids are responding to those pressures that left me wondering: is there anything that ties them together?

Through the lens of faith, I very much believe that there is. Through the lens of faith what I see, what I hear, what I feel is that kids are responding to the thought, 'there's something wrong with me'. They might not articulate in those exact words...but it's there.

Why can't I give the right answer (there's something wrong with me)? Why do I feel so alone...even when I'm with my friends (there's something wrong with me)? Do my friends really like me (there's something wrong with me)? What if my GPA isn't high enough (there's something wrong with me)? What if I don't get into my top three college choices (there's something wrong with me)? Why can't I have or do what someone else has or does (there's something wrong with me)? Why don't my parents love me (there's something wrong with me)? Am I just a screw up and it's only a matter of time before the world sees the truth (there's something wrong with me)?

That whisper, that lie, regardless of how imbedded (and therefore quiet) it may be...is there...and our children are responding to that voice and so many of them are responding in ways that have led them to become a part of the statistics that have been put out there for us to ruminate upon and hopefully respond to.

And it is through that lens of faith, a lens that reminds us that despite the world's very real difficulties, that we should not worry, and that there is nothing in all creation that 'will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord', that we slow down today so that we might be able to acknowledge (by name) the children, our children, and the schools, our schools, where these difficulties are actively present in a myriad of ways.

So that was the seed that was planted.

However, as the idea grew, a realization sprang forth: that voice, that lie (that there's something wrong with me), it's not just something that our kids hear and respond to...it's something that people of all ages, races, educational and economic levels hear and respond to.

And, by and large, how we respond tends to be similarly...broken.

All of a sudden, a time of worship that was initially conceived of as an occasion when we actively lift up our children and our schools in prayer became a time when the children led the rest of us to think about all of us (doesn't it say somewhere that 'a little child will lead them'? Yes, yes it does (Isaiah 11:6)).

Here's the thing about the stats that I put out there: you don't have to look far to realize that the way that people are self-medicating is just as frightening for adults. Anxiety, depression, suicide, and drug abuse are experiencing increases among all age demographics. One stat that has been hanging with me since I saw it a few weeks ago is this: drug overdose death in New Jersey went up 35% between 2015-2016 to 2016-2017 with 2,284 people dying.

And no, that doesn't touch upon all of the other ways that people try and respond to that voice, that lie that continues gnaw around the edges of our lives saying, 'there's something wrong with me'.

It's there...and instead of allowing it to become something that we ignore, we try and dominate into submission, or worry about, we are instead going to take an initial step that reorients us in a direction back to God...and we're going to do it together. We need to pray for our kids. We need to pray for our schools. We need to pray for ourselves. We need to pray for our families. We need to pray for our friends. We need to pray for our co-workers. We need to pray for those people whom we do not like even a little bit. We need to pray that we might be able to name that whisper of 'something is wrong with me' for what it is: a lie that distorts our identity as found in Christ Jesus. We need to pray, not because that's going to take care of it so that it's no longer a difficulty anymore (may I have a pill please to take away all my problems?), but because it allows us to be reminded of who we are (people in need of a savior) and to whom we belong (a God who is so 'all in' on us that He was willing to send his son to die).

How we are going to offer those prayers will be a little different. I know: with this board that has been sitting up here all this time that we haven't talked about, the possibility that we might be doing something different seems to utterly remote...but I digress! During the offertory we are going to come around with pieces of paper. You are allowed to use as many pieces as you need. On each piece of paper, I want you to write down the name of a child, I want you to write down the name of a teacher or a school, I want you to write down the name of anyone and everyone who is struggling this day because they have in some way begun to believe the lie that there is something wrong with them.

People of God...look in the mirror! Who does God see?! He sees His most precious child!

Don't believe the lie that you are unlovable, that you are broken beyond repair, that you are a lost cause, so just give up.

God loves you and if God loves you then regardless of how difficult it may be, it will still be blessed! Hear these words for the 139th Psalm, if for no other reason than it reorients back to that place of remembering who God is and always will be, and who we are to the Almighty.

Psalm 139

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. ² You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. ³ You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. ⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. ⁵ You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. ⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? ⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. ⁹ If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, ¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. ¹¹ If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night', ¹² even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

¹³ For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. ¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. ¹⁶ Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. ¹⁷ How weighty to me are your thoughts,

O God! How vast is the sum of them! ¹⁸ I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end—I am still with you.

You have been known by God from the beginning of time...and He loves You. You are not broken beyond repair, but we must we must we must support one another so that we are able to counteract the lie that becomes ever more believable.

Prayerfully write down a name and then you will be invited to come forward and pin that name to the board so that no one else in the congregation will be able to see it.

There's something wrong with me. The lie is being believed by our kids. It's being believed by so many of us. Don't believe the lie. Reorient.

We start today.

After Sermon Prayer

Holy God, for so many, in so many ways, we are able to recognize actions and inactions that show that we are listening to a lie, a lie that causes us to move in ways that are not of You. Lord, help us to reorient our perception, our thinking, our very lives so that we might be able to come to You with all those people, and yes even ourselves. Allow this reorientation to begin to permeate us to our very core...today...beginning right now. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.