

PROPER 13, PENTECOST 10, YEAR B, AUGUST 1, 2021

I would like to tell you a story this morning that begins with a little girl. She was only four back in the 1950's when her mother dropped her off at a working farm in North West Georgia. It was a strange place coming from Miami but it was a place where there were about a dozen other children who were cared for by Mamma Skinner and Papa Lue. It was an orphanage of sorts but not the kind of institutional ones we think of. All the children had chores to do on the farm and most of the time they went barefoot and were all washed in the same big metal tub one at a time. Theirs was a hard life with Mamma Skinner and Papa Lue trying to scrape a living off the farm but the little girl didn't see it that way. She loved to run and play with the other children, swinging on a tire rope, climbing trees, playing all sorts of games. One of the best times of the day for the little girl was after supper and before bedtime when Mamma Skinner would read to them from the Bible. She loved the stories Mamma Skinner read and how on Sundays they would all pile into the back of the pickup truck to drive to the local Baptist church where she was taught to pray.

The little girl had her own special way of praying. She loved to climb a big old oak tree on the farm as far as she could and there she would pray. She called God Daddy God. She told God everything because Mamma Skinner had told her it was good to talk God and she always felt better afterwards. One day she climbed the tree and told Daddy God that she missed her momma terribly and didn't understand why she didn't come back. After she prayed she sang Jesus loves you to God.

She never really did understand why her momma had sent her away except for the man that scared her back in Miami who had touched her. Her momma had said she'd be back soon but it was two years before she came back to the farm. Instead of coming to take her away her momma put a bundle in her arms and told her she had a baby brother and off she left again.

The little girl was ecstatic to have her baby brother to take care of. Over the next three years their lives were filled with working on the farm, reading the Bible and talking to Daddy God up in the big oak. Mamma Skinner felt the little girl had a special relationship with God as her prayers were always heartfelt. Once when her brother, now a toddler had wandered off and couldn't be found, she ran to her tree and prayed that she would find him and she did. Another time he was injured badly and bleeding fiercely and prayed he wouldn't die and he didn't or the time a fire came close to the farm and they were evacuating and the little girl prayed and prayed that the farm would be spared and it was. Mamma Skinner always told her, God will be near when you need God and she always thanked God when her prayers were answered. The little girl and her brother were pretty content on the farm until the day everything changed.

Her mother's sister and husband came to take them to California to live with them. As the little girl left the big oak for the final time tears flowed from her eyes. Little did they realize that the life that was awaiting them would be filled with heartache and terror. It was the second day of their trip when the little girl asked an innocent question and the next thing she knew she was backhanded across the face by her aunt. Never had she ever experienced anything like this but it was a foretaste of what their life would be for quite some time.

The little girl and her brother experienced unbelievable physical, emotional and mental abuse over the next several years. They were treated as slaves having to do all the chores, for her aunt and uncle and their children, even scrubbing the bathroom floor with a toothbrush. Several times they ran away only to be cajoled back by their uncle or returned by the police and told if they behaved this wouldn't happen. Remember this was before authorities were trained to look for this. At one point other relatives including their grandmother attempted to gain custody of the two children only to have the court decide that the grandmother was "too elderly to care for both of them. However, the little girl, now a teenager, was granted the opportunity to stay with her grandmother while her brother would be sent back to his abusive aunt and uncle. The girl would not hear of leaving her brother there alone and voluntarily went back to protect her brother in whatever way she could. But that wasn't always possible. One time he was so severely beaten that he had to crawl to his room and stayed in bed for several days.

The beatings continued on both of them by both their aunt and uncle until the day of her 18th birthday when her aunt literally threw her out of the house because she would no longer receive state aid for her. Her brother now had to fend for himself. Not only was he abused at home but he was constantly defending himself among his peers. He quickly learned how to fight figuring none of the kids could hit him as hard as his uncle which eventually earned him a respect he hadn't anticipated. When he was 16, as he took another beating from his aunt, he told her this was the last time she would ever lay a hand on him as he was leaving. He literally walked out of the house with no shoes on right to the police station where they saw the bruises on his back. He was finally given refuge after 13 years of relentless abuse.

This sister and brothers story is not just one of abuse but survival. They are both adults now and the boy, Bryan "Eddie" Nash has written their story in a book titled, "A Phoenix Rising Defining the Moments:" a true story of a child's triumph over abandonment and abuse. The young girl in the story's name is Cindy Goodfellow and she is a very good friend of mine. I am telling you this story this morning for several reasons.

In the gospel Jesus refers to himself as the bread of life and whoever comes to him will not hunger. We all hunger for many things in life and I don't mean physical things either. Our souls long for a sense of being and belonging. For Cindy and Eddie they hungered for peace, for stability, for compassion and love. Cindy found it when she would climb her beloved tree in Georgia and talk to Daddy God. Eddie found it walking under three trees in his neighborhood where he would "feel an amazing energy come over him. They both understood that the hunger inside of them was somehow fulfilled in small ways that kept them going.

The small ways in which that hunger was fulfilled can be found in Paul's letter to the Ephesians this morning where he writes about the many gifts we are given to be leaders. The text tells us leaders are to equip the saints for the work of ministry. Now equipping is about training but it is also about restoration and healing. The word equip comes from an interesting family of Greek words which describe, among other things, the setting of broken bones, fostering healing, and working for rehabilitation. "Mending is from this same family of words, so mending and equipping are related. To equip is to weave back together the frayed edges of life, to repair brokenness rather than to write-off the broken, and to restore rather than discard the shattered. It is to help people trust that in spite of what life has done to them and with them they can be useful again."

In his book Eddie has acknowledged the many “saints” as he calls them who helped him find his way out. He writes, “It was the validation from these many that kept me going, seeking something right while submerged in wrong.” They equipped him with the ability to repair his brokenness and restore the shattered parts of his being. It was these people who helped him weave back together the frayed edges of his life and taught him about love. For Eddie writes that most of all his story is about love; the love of my sister, the love we learned from the old women on the farm. “Love is what I learned from an old man down the street who could find a way to share his time.....Love is about the family across the street stepping up and baptizing me; and my Godfather who opened the door for sports and touched my heart with encouragement.....Love is about a perfect stranger standing up for me as my aunt accused me of being a thief when I wasn’t.....It’s about a teacher that cared to enlighten me about the world, expand my horizon and broaden my mind.... Love is about the many people who took a moment to make up that difference; the gap in my life. Through their love I learned right from wrong and I learned to know better. As I grew I learned compassion. They gave me a vision of hope beyond my circumstances. It was the entire journey that taught me life’s greatest lesson and that is to look outside the walls of circumstance and open your heart.....and the greatest healer of all is the love you can give.

With that love Eddie founded the Eddie Nash Foundation whose goal is to offer programs and camp for foster children to help break the cycle of child abuse, prejudice hate, and all forms of violence affecting youth. Their camp called Camp to Belong unites siblings who are placed in different foster homes to come together for a week in the summer. Their Passport to Success program offers foster youth much needed life skills before they leave the foster system. Cindy and Eddie’s story is an amazing story of love overcoming evil. But it is also our story for in hearing their story we realize that all of us are equipped to bring healing and restoration, compassion and love to others in sometimes the most simple yet profound ways. We all have the capacity to bring God’s love to others and to equip each other for the trials that life brings. Jesus said I am the bread of Life – life which is the love of God that is grace filled, compassionate, tolerant, forgiving, and endless. That is the love we are equipped to give to others which can make all the difference in the world – even if it’s only to one person. For as Eddie said, the greatest healer of all is the love you can give. Amen.