

September 8, 2019

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

A New Identity

Philemon 1:1-21

Faith Formation Sunday

Rev. Caela Wood of First Congregational Church in Manhattan, Kansas learned about Blessing of the Backpacks from another United Church of Christ colleague, the Rev. Jennifer Mills Knutsen. Five years ago, Wood's congregation started a regular ritual of backpack blessing on the same day Sunday School re-starts for the fall.

"We wanted to create space for kids to find comfort from their faith community when we know they might be filled with back-to-school jitters," Rev. Wood says. "We encourage adults who are going back to school to bring along backpacks, laptop bags, and briefcases, too. Our congregation has a lot of teachers and professors, so we also bless them on that same Sunday."

"The kids hand out the bookmarks to our many teachers. Lifting up our 'outside work' in the world helps us feel connected to the ways the Spirit journeys with us throughout the week...in classrooms and cubicles and in our homes and everywhere we go."

"We typically put out notecards during fellowship hour for each child/youth/college student who has recently moved away. We ask anyone who feels so moved to take a card and write a note to college students, children and youth who have moved away in the past few years. Then we stick a backpack tag in for them and mail it to them. I have heard from several parents that this is very meaningful to them as the kids are adjusting to life in a new community."

Unlike most other epistles which are addressed to communities, Philemon is a short letter addressed to a single individual. In today's reading Paul sends his adopted child Onesimus forth with this letter of blessing indicating how he would like Philemon to treat the youngster. The message of this letter, that Onesimus is trustworthy and hardworking, is perhaps as much for his student as it is for the man who will receive the letter. Onesimus knows that he has been loved, appreciated and supported and that he will continue to be. The young man has been sent into the world by himself, but he does not go alone. He goes with the knowledge that he has been truly seen and appreciated.

Today, on this Faith Formation Sunday, we celebrate the teaching that happens within our four walls. This day is also an opportunity to remember that the messages we send with our young people into the world teach them as much as any curriculum, maybe even more.

What messages do you give the young people in your congregation as they head out into the world? How can you let them know that they are valued, loved and supported even when they are not within the confines of the four walls of your church building?