

**Pentecost and Confirmation Sermon: “Reckless Love” based on Acts 2:1-11 and Joel 2:27-32a
Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on May 19, 2024, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

As you might well quickly figure out, I am not a long-distance runner. However, I know that we have a good number of you who do like to run long distances. My wife, of course, is among your tribe, and I respect all y’all’s commitment.

I did run one 5k back in 2017, but for me, my experience with distance runs has been as a supporting spouse recently and before that primarily from planning and developing of a 5k/10k event. This event raised money for an excellent program that helped people in their battle with substance abuse.

Now, in my first year, the program director wanted me to double the funds raised by the event. I had never run a race before, but I figured it was simple: If we wanted to raise more funds, we would have to increase the number of people who participated.

This seemed obvious, except that the location where we started the race had little or no parking adjacent to the starting line. There was one parking lot only about 300 to 500 feet or less away. This one was held the previous year’s participants no problem. But if the race got any bigger, that would mean participants would have to walk at least 1,000 or 2,000 feet to get to the registration and the starting line.

And so, the discussion began – How do we make it easier for people to get to the starting line? Some suggested a shuttle. Others suggested having volunteers park in the farthest spots, so that the runners could use the closest spots. It’s not much, but it would help. In the end, we said let’s have the volunteers park close, and make the runners walk.

After all, if they made the commitment to run or walk 5k or 10k, surely, they were the most capable of parking farther away and walking a distance to begin their run. We figured, if they can’t walk 1,000 or 2,000 feet, why’d they sign up to walk or run anyway?

The young people up here today are like those walkers and runners for the 5k and 10k event. Unlike the adults who desire to join the church, we made these young people park far away. They have gone through a process that we do not require of most adults. As you know the new member class for adults is really about discerning whether you as an adult want to be a part of the congregation. But for the young people, they are led through a process to understand what our faith entails.

Now, this does two things – one positive, and one negative. The positive is that they take the time to learn about the faith, to engage, ask questions, and grow in their walk with God under the guidance of several adults, including Don and Kathryn Bridges and Tom Martin this year. The negative is that it can feel like an accomplishment. It can feel like an achievement. They might say, “I went through all the classes and now I’m done.”

But in truth, the young people here today that we will baptize and confirm, as wonderful as they are, have not accomplished anything. They have not run the race, but today, they have completed only the walk to the starting line. Confirmation is the moment you confirm, before this whole congregation, that you are ready to begin the race, the journey of your lifetime to be a part of the

community that is the Church. This is to be part of a community guided by the Holy Spirit, which seals us and marks us as the adopted children of God by this Spirit living in and among us.

In our reading today, this is the moment the first disciples of Jesus began their race. It was as the Spirit rushed into their room like a violent wind and settled on them. It was visible in something like tongues of fire resting on their heads. Then they went out and proclaimed who Jesus is and what he did and everyone there heard this proclamation in their own language. It was as if they each had a translator for them alone. At this point, they too were at the starting line, and began their race as followers of Jesus. Jesus was gone, but the Holy Spirit became central to their life in the church, being God with them in and among them.

Each of these young people, whether they know it or not, has been led here by the Holy Spirit. They have been led here to discover God's never-ending, relentless love for them. They may not know every doctrine, but they're here because they are loved. A few minutes ago, you heard Lucas and Catherine beautifully sing the song, "Reckless Love." I love this song and the truth it contains about the Triune God we worship today.

"Before I spoke a word, You were singing over me. You have been so, so good to me. Before I took a breath, You breathed Your life in me. You have been so, so kind to me."

Beloved, these young people are not loved by God because they are being confirmed today. No, they are loved by God because it is God who made them and fills them with life.

"O, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God. O, it chases me down, fights 'til I'm found, leaves the 99; I couldn't earn it, I don't deserve it, still You give yourself away. O, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God."

I remember when this song came out, a friend and missionary, was deeply offended by its message. He said there is nothing that God ever does which is reckless, certainly not God's love. Perhaps...but in the eyes of this world, for the powerful to humble themselves to share in the plight and circumstances of those who are considered beneath them and then do something entirely for their benefit alone, is usually seen as reckless.

In the eyes of this world, to love the people killing you, even praying for their forgiveness, is reckless. For a God in the ancient world to decide to become human, live in human limits and die human death and rise again for the sake of humans, is all very, very reckless.

"When I was Your foe, still Your love fought for me. You have been so, so good to me. When I felt no worth, You paid it all for me. You have been so, so kind to me."

As we heard in the reading from Joel, for a God to empower women and men to speak as equals and prophesy was seen in the ancient world, and even by some today, as reckless. To give dreams and aspirations to people who are old is reckless. Who knows how long they'll have to live those dreams out. To give visions for wisdom to the young, is reckless. Surely, they'll screw it up. To pour out the Spirit to fill up the lowliest of the low, the enslaved men and women, is reckless.

You see, there may be much that scares us in this world and much we still expect that God will do to make things right and bring justice. But the love of God knows no boundaries and has reached out to these young people and it reaches out to each and every single one of us here today. The

Holy Spirit that descended upon the disciples that first Pentecost is present in and among us this morning, and it is this Spirit that is given to you to empower you to change the world for the better.

The Spirit is given so that we might live like Christ and reflect Christ into the world. The proof of this is seen in the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, forbearance or putting up with each other. That might be the hardest on the list. It is kindness, not mere niceness, but also being helpful. It is goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. All of these spread God’s message and God’s love. Imagine if we reflected these in the world today. It would spread the good news of God with us in and through us, making this world a better place through the Spirit.

Beloved, when we cultivate these fruits and listen to the Spirit, when it calls us to live in this manner, we ourselves grow. Whatever you are in life, whatever you want to be, with the Spirit and with these fruits, you will be better at it, no matter what.

You are loved by God in order to share that love in the world around us. I pray that each of these young people recognize this as the beginning. This is the start of an amazing journey with God the Holy Spirit empowering them, pouring the love of God in their hearts. It is a journey with the Spirit crying out at your side in times of trouble. I hope they recognize the Spirit in this community, which has many parts, but is one body.

“There's no shadow You won't light up, mountain You won't climb up, coming after me. There's no wall You won't kick down, lie You won't tear down, coming after me.”

This is the truth of God’s love and the truth of the Holy Spirit. It may seem reckless for God’s love to be given so freely. It may seem reckless for God to give without our having to earn it, but it is precisely this recklessness that sets our God apart, that makes God Holy. For the Spirit blows where it wishes, and it changes us, makes us holy in turn. Amen.