

How Do We Raise Each Other Up?

Friends on this shared journey of life and faith, what a gift it is to be freely gathered for worship on this late spring morning. We are on the live stream and on land loved by First Nations and others before us and where we are building community now and into the future.

Let's begin this time of reflection with a word of prayer. God, we feel your love at work in our lives. We pray this morning that you will further open our senses and expand our spirits – so that we will bravely lean into opportunities to raise up and to be raised up by one another. We pray as followers of Jesus, whom you raised up. Let the people say together, Amen: Amen!

If you were in my shoes, you would have known since Tuesday that Sharon would offer the song “You Raise Me Up,” as a piano prelude this morning. I found myself intermittently humming bits of the tune throughout the week, fondly remembering dancing with my father to that song at a wedding reception.

Now, each in our own shoes, perhaps you have gotten to wondering – why is that song so catchy and heart-warming? Irish songwriter and novelist Brendan Graham wrote the lyrics in 2002. The song went on to be a hit as recorded by solo artist Josh Groban in 2003 and also by an Irish boy band called Westlife. The lyrics are few. An opening verse sets a soulful tone for us today:

*“When I am down and, oh, my soul, so weary
When troubles come and my heart burdened be
Then I am still and wait here in the silence
Until You come and sit awhile with me”*

The word 'You' in "You come" is capitalized, which lends itself to meaning God, Spirit, or Jesus. Indeed, "You Raise Me Up" is often interpreted and experienced as a deeply spiritual song.

Has your weary soul or burdened heart recently felt the presence of God's Holy Spirit, of the risen loving Christ come to sit awhile with you?

The song then swells into its refrain, repeated four times – forming the remainder of the song:

*"You raise me up so I can stand on mountains
You raise me up to walk on stormy seas
I am strong when I am on Your shoulders
You raise me up to more than I can be"*

What does it look like to be raised up to more than we can be? And who has come to sit a while with you? Maybe you have felt Jesus himself alongside you. Or perhaps you feel emboldened and strengthened when alongside someone with whom you physically brush shoulders in your day-to-day living.

Or it may be someone who has transitioned beyond death. The veil of death can stay thin if we allow it. Like Jesus, the loved ones who have nurtured goodness in our lives and gone on before us are also risen and powerfully present if we welcome them. When you think of those who have been a source of steadfast support in your life, which of these describes how they have raised you up?

"To stand on mountains" is to be able to stretch and reach beyond what I thought I could. Who has helped you to stand on mountains?

“To walk on stormy seas” is to be able to keep on keeping on through a time of tumultuous conflict, loss and grief, and/or change. Who has supported you in walking on stormy seas?

To be *“strong when on another’s shoulders”* is to accept and embrace the support that makes it possible for us to reach further and to persevere through a storm. On whose shoulders have you stood?

Moments ago, we prayed that God would lead us to bravely lean into opportunities both to raise up other and to be raised up by others.

I have long loved today’s story from the book of Acts about the disciple named Dorcas, evidenced by this tiny children’s book that I wondered about with our young people. We do not know if she and Jesus crossed paths in a traditional sense. We do know that Jesus’ teachings and lived example of compassion inspired her way of life.

We heard, *“All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them.”*

The story of Dorcas illustrates the power of reciprocity when it comes to embodying love in ways through which we raise each other up.

The women wept in part because of the raw grief they felt at the time of Dorcas’s death – a grief that they would continue to feel in waves that would vary in intensity the rest of their lives. The women also seemed to weep from a space of deep gratitude for how real Dorcas had made God’s love feel in their lives. **I invite us to wonder this morning: Who has made God’s love feel real, strong, powerful in each of our lives?** I encourage us to let those loved ones know of their impact. We never know how many opportunities we will have to express gratitude. And we can continue to do so beyond death. They will hear us.

The presence of reciprocity shows itself as the women attend to Dorcas's needs at the end of her life, giving their utmost to ensure she felt God's love flowing back to her. With Dorcas and her friends, let's welcome God to lead us as we bravely lean into opportunities both to raise up other and to be raised up by others.

"Then she opened her eyes," we heard, "and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up."

Let's bring this time of reflection to a close with words of encouragement from two wise ones. With a mentor's heart, Paul or one of his closest disciples wrote to the Colossians and to us:

"... [C]lothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful."

May we, indeed, clothe ourselves in the ways of Jesus and Dorcas and their communities – such that we can be ready to raise and be raised up.

And from the poet, Mary Oliver (and I invite you to close your eyes if it helps to hear the words washing over you):

"Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again... Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting – over and over announcing your place in the family of things."

Friends, may we live as though we know the world is calling to us to participate in raising up – because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Acts 9:36-43, Colossians 3:12-17, "Wild Geese"