

**Strength to Love:
Glimpses of Intergenerational Care
Father's Day, Sunday, June 18, 2023**

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones with reflections by Andy, Duncan, and Sean

Hymns: #21 For the Beauty of the Earth, #123 Spirit of Life/Fuente de Amor; # 348 Guide My Feet.
Special Music: My Lord, What a Morning, African American Spiritual, arr. Mark Hayes, Lullaby (Goodnight, My Angel) by Billy Joel. Wind beneath My Wings by Jeff Silbar & Larry Henley

Sermon Part 1 — Introduction — Roger Jones

For far too long, social attitudes and images in the movies, TV, and other media have given men and boys a narrow choice of roles. We are either strong, or we are weak. It is absolutely crucial to be in charge, to be right all the time, not to show emotions, and *never* to need help. Be a winner, not a loser.

The reality is that such narrow, sexist roles have been hurtful to males as well as to females and to people of any gender identity. No matter who we are, sometimes life calls us to be strong, and at other times it calls us to let go of control, to surrender our certainties, to be humble. Sometimes being vulnerable is a demonstration of courage.

It requires strength to put others' needs ahead of our own agendas. It calls for strength to show love without expectation. Any one of us can do this, even though it's not easy. Whether we are parents, relatives, friends, congregation members or volunteers, we can provide a listening presence, reliable support, and encouragement. Because today is Father's Day, this morning we will take a few glimpses of men who have tried to summon the strength to show love to children and youth.

One person is a friend of mine who is in his mid-30s. He's the single dad of two children; one is 9 years old and the other is almost 1. He shares custody with two different women, who are their mothers. Though not married, he had had a relationship with each of them when each of the children was conceived and born. He and the mothers eventually separated, however. He now spends half the time caring for the 9-year-old, but less than half with the 1-year-old until the baby is older. Whether in court or in conversations, navigating the custody arrangements, weekly scheduling, parenting strategies, and financial support has not been easy. Yet this father and each of the mothers are committed to treating one another with respect and to not airing disagreements in front of the children.

This particular father grew up in a family of five kids. He was born prematurely. His dad left when he was 3 years old, and his mother struggled with drug and alcohol abuse. He said: "I had to repeat the seventh grade, and then in high school, I dropped out." He got his GED at age 22. As a young adult, he drank and partied late into the evening, and slept-in on many days. He went from one job to another with little care. "I didn't have anything to build for," he said.

What spurred him to get off that path, what gave him something to build for, was learning that he would be a father. As he put it: "Something inside me changed."

He didn't attend college, but he got into a sales and marketing occupation. In that career his integrity, energy and friendly openness made him quite successful. Being a father gave him a purpose. He works hard to be a provider, a reliable person, and a role model to his kids. He said: "Nothing is more important than their health and well-being. If they're doing okay, I'm okay. I could have the worst day at work, but when I get home, the kids are the only thing that

matters.” He wants to ensure that his kids have the kind of experiences he was not able to have in his own troubled childhood. As he told me: “I get to relive what I didn’t have as a child, like celebrating birthdays together, and cutting down our Christmas tree as a family.”

He told me, “A lot of people think there’s no good men around,” but he disagrees. “A lot of dads don’t get enough credit,” he said. When he takes his children to the park, he often perceives that he is the only man with children there, but he doesn’t mind. “I’m proud to be a dad,” he said. It gives him a purpose, and it gives him joy. It gives me hope to know this man, and to know so many other men who found the strength to love.

Next in our service we will hear from Andy, Sean, and Duncan. Later, I will offer more of my own thoughts.

Andy’s Reflections:

A few years ago, I started planning for my soon-to-be retirement. For the last three decades, I have worked as an environmental engineer. And while my job has been interesting and rewarding, I knew that I wanted to find more meaningful ways to engage in my retirement. In my 20s, I had been an inner-city high school math and science teacher, and during that time, I worked at a summer camp in Plumas County. I have a lot of fond memories of both jobs, and I enjoyed working with teenagers. My own daughters were leaving for college and parenting didn’t require the same level of intensity that it once did. What to do with all my free time?

I decided to volunteer as a Court Appointed Special Advocate, a CASA for short. As a CASA, for over 2 years, I have worked one-on-one with a foster youth, advocating for their best interest. As the name implies, this relationship is formalized in an appointment by the county Superior court that oversees foster youth.

You can understand that the specifics of this youth are confidential, so I won’t talk about those. But even speaking generally, the reality of being in the foster care system can be grim, especially for teens. These children have been exposed to trauma, sometimes repeatedly. Consider all the things that might cause a family to dissolve: drug and alcohol abuse, physical and emotional abuse, unemployment and homelessness, mental or physical illness, and incarceration or death of a parent. Now consider as a child, if multiples of these happened in your family or even all of these, and then you were removed from your family, which is traumatic in and of itself. I want to acknowledge and hold space for those that have experienced such trauma, including those here today.

There are nearly 80,000 children in foster care in California, and only a fraction of those have a CASA assigned to them. Children of color and those that identify as LGTBQ are over-represented in foster care, in some cases by shocking amounts, not by a few percent, but by multiples. For youth that age-out of foster care, more than 1-in-4 are homeless and 1-in-5 are incarcerated at some point by age 21. I’m motivated by the fact that those outcomes are significantly improved when a foster youth has a Court Appointed Special Advocate. For me, volunteering as a CASA is justice work, homelessness prevention, and mentoring rolled together and focused on one child. I am working toward the best outcomes possible for my youth.

Most weeks, we spend 3 hours together. To be an effective advocate, I need to understand them and their needs, so we spend time together. We do things that hopefully a teen would enjoy. We get something to eat, we shop, we work out, and sometimes we drive around randomly with the music cranked up. We also do things that a teen wouldn’t always like. We talk about progress with schoolwork, issues with their family of origin or their foster family, drug use, sexual

activity, and race and racism to name a few. During those times, I try to model being a stable and supportive adult that they can trust. They don't have many of those in their life. For some youth, particularly teens, there is a constant churn of social workers, attorneys, therapists, foster placements, and schools. As a CASA, I am there after every move, sadly, so many moves that I long ago lost count. I provide continuity, and I convey critical information about the youth and their needs to the new players.

This is an exercise in seeing the inherent worth and dignity of one individual. That is a powerful thing when almost no one else in their world can or does see that. Working with the youth long enough, I see glimpses of maturity poking through. I see their positive attributes and strengths. It can be very powerful for the youth when I notice the good things about them and say them out loud. For example, more than once, I have been impressed by how direct and clear-headed this teen can be addressing conflict when it arises between us. I've watched while they advocated effectively for themselves in a room full of adults. I've seen their consideration of and generosity to others.

Being a CASA has changed me for the better. At times, it has pushed me well beyond my comfort zone. I have been confronted with some big issues that leave me sleeplessly pondering a way forward. But that makes me more sensitive to the times and ways that I push my youth beyond their comfort zone. I have become more aware of sensitivities around race. I'm seeing the world through this teen's eyes, and unfortunately, the experience of racism is part of that view.

Being a CASA volunteer has also led me to learn about the ways that childhood trauma can shape one's life, and to understand that in most circumstances I might never know another person's story. What have they experienced? What burden of the past are they carrying? Consequently, I'm trying to approach people that I encounter with more empathy and compassion.

I can see the positive impact that having a CASA has had. But I worry, is it enough in the face of all the factors at the root of those grim statistics? And beneath my worry, is love for this youth. Given everything that they have experienced, will their strengths shine through? At heart, being a CASA has expanded my capacity for giving and receiving love. Will love be enough? I have hope.

Sean's Reflections:

I was a pretty rigid kid. I grew up into a pretty rigid adult. My boundaries were hard and crossing them even slightly was unforgivable, like stepping on a trapdoor in the floor and falling down a chute and out of my life. Reflecting back on my life before fatherhood, I see a long trail of people who stepped on my trapdoors and fell through. Most of them probably never knew what they had done, and honestly, the reasons were pretty minor.

Eventually, I met someone who didn't just blindly push against my boundaries. She wanted to learn where the trapdoors were and why I had them. With *this* person, I wanted to have a family. Little did I know just how much having a family would strain my boundaries.

Unlike an acquaintance, or even a friend, you can't simply eject children from your life because they pushed at your boundaries. They like to find your trapdoors and step on them. Stomp on them. Jump up and down on them after piling a mountain of rocks on them.

Even just trying to write this, one or two little people kept trying to capture my attention, or stop me from writing entirely.

Most of my memories of fatherhood are well rooted in the positive things. Gazing into their eyes as they drift off to sleep. Rocking them and singing to them. Walking through our garden with the toddler in a backpack carrier crunching on sugar snap peas he'd grabbed from a vine. Experiencing their developmental milestones. Celebrating their new experiences. Especially food. Food was always a big source of joy for our little ones.

You look at them in these moments and think they're just so precious, nothing could really overcome that, even when jiggling the baby resulted in me wearing my wife's spare gym pants out of the restaurant that day, even when they wet the bed at 3AM *right after you changed their diaper*.

They are precious, but there are still many, *many* times that they force you to stretch those boundaries.

When you're tired and they just won't sleep,
When nothing can calm them down on a long car ride,
When they just have to have *that* toy because *they* want it.

I'd like to say that I learned to be so flexible that I could just roll with whatever they threw at me. Everything from raw emotions to the occasional hard object. I'd *like* to say that, but it just wouldn't be true. Kids have this incredible knack for triggering the trapdoor no matter how strongly you brace them closed. Even when they fall down the chute, you can't let them fall clear out of your life.

Fatherhood has taught me to not only be resilient and flexible when someone is pushing against my boundaries, but to also put a ladder there for them to climb back up after they fall through. Does it mean that I no longer have *any* traps from which there is no return? Not at all. I am still, in many ways, a very rigid person. Those ways are *far* fewer than they used to be. It is how I can not only be a part of this community, but truly embrace it.

Fatherhood has taught me to point out my trapdoors. It's taught me to be resilient when they are stepped on. And now I can say with confidence that being a father has made them difficult to spring and with very few exceptions, there is a ladder at the end of the chute for you to climb back up on.

Duncan's Reflections:

I don't know anything about Father's day. My biological father joined the service to escape the reality of getting my biological mother pregnant. He did not return from Vietnam. I was given up for adoption to a couple that couldn't have kids of their own. My adopted father paid the bills, but was otherwise mostly uninvolved in my life. I don't have kids of my own, though I'm still keeping the option open to adopt. I had to laugh a little when Rev Roger asked me to say something on Father's day, after all, what does this day have to do with me?

It wasn't until later in life that I realized I was interested in working with children. About 17 years ago I volunteered to mentor and tutor at-risk youth, meeting with them once a week. I found this experience more rewarding than my career at the time. About 8 years ago I realized I needed a degree to progress in my field, and decided to change careers to education, and went for my Child Development Degree. The next several years were the most transformative in my life.

I interned for two years while working on my General Education as a preschool teacher, a position I initially refused... after all, what would I be able to offer 3 to 5

year olds? Unexpectedly, they had a lot to offer me. Watching the elation and excitement of a child who has learned something new could buoy my spirit for a week.

After I got my degree I started substitute teaching. Sometimes my students accidentally call me their teacher's name. Once in a while I have even been called Mom. I recall one young man that was extremely embarrassed after he called me Mom. I actually, that that is one of the biggest compliments I can receive. I was happy to be in the same category as one who was nurturing and maternal. Maybe Roger should have asked me to speak on Mother's Day instead. Remind me next year.

I would love to serve as a mentor for children long term, to be involved in their life into adulthood. It's something I have never experienced, and would be vindicating for me considering my personal experience with fathers. After a long educational journey, I will finally be teaching my own elementary school classroom in the Fall.

I was substituting for Sac City Unified, who just let out last week, and I don't have the money to travel for the summer, so if you know someone who has a child that needs tutoring or watching, look me up.

I'm the tall guy that drives that Bug, that has more in common with Mother's Day. Thank you!

Sermon Part 2 — Roger Jones

Whoever we are—of any gender or age—we can support, encourage, and help children and youth in a variety of ways. Doing so can deepen our lives as well as provide healing, vitality, and peace to others and the world.

I've never had a child, but I've enjoyed having them in my life. A year ago, my housemate went back to India to bring his wife and baby here. Now we have a full house. The little girl was two when she arrived. She's cute, musical, clever, demanding and ... willful! She apparently doesn't approve of my reading selections, as she rearranges my bookshelves every week. After studying my little dog's way of exiting the kitchen through the flap in the bottom of the back door, one day the baby decided to crawl through it herself. Her mamma recorded it on video. This child is amusing on a daily basis, yet her emotional range can go from one high-volume extreme to the other in a flash. Oh, my goodness!

My longest relationships with children have been with my two nephews. One is now 40. He was born when I was at college, so we've developed a friendship mostly when he was older. I've admired his progress as a chef and enjoyed his humorous tales from life as a convention-center dining manager. Every now and then, my phone will vibrate with a text: "Hello, uncle! How are you doing?" He's good at reaching out. His older brother is now 51. When I was a teenager and he was a baby, this nephew moved into our house several years. His mother had passed away, and my mom reared him while my brother worked, so he was like a little brother. Not long after I got my driver's license, I drove him to the premiere of *Star Wars* at the movies in 1977. He was only 6, but I don't think either of us understood what was going on. When I was at college and he came to visit, I walked him all over my wooded college campus and took him to meals with friends. I introduced him to theater and classical music. We have always enjoyed our conversations, but they are now few and far between unless I go to visit him. He does *not* reach out. One year I called him on his birthday and left a voicemail message. That was in May.

He returned my call—in August. His parents told me not to take it personally. Neither nephew has children, though both are married.

As an adult most of my time with children and youth has been focused on life in the congregations where I have served. I am grateful to know so many kids, and it gives me joy to watch them learn, play, express their values and ideas, and grow before my very eyes. Thank you for this privilege and the honor of being a minister here.

In addition to family, household, and congregations, I have attempted to be of service to children and youth in other ways. The inspiration for this primarily comes the Reverend Charlie Kast, my late friend and mentor. He is an enduring role model.

He was the minister of the Second Unitarian Church, which I joined after moving to Chicago at age 27. Over the years, I got involved with our ministry to children and youth. At first, I felt self-conscious and inadequate. Yet I came to learn that I didn't have to be somebody other than who I was in order to be accepted by them. And I didn't have to be charismatic or have any special talents, only to accept them for who *they* were. After becoming a minister, I tried to follow Charlie's advice that a minister should learn every kid's name in the church so that we could call them by name.

Charlie loved kids and youth. He cared about them in the church. He also cared about the children beyond our walls—and cared about the plight of children in our country. While serving at our church, he became a licensed foster parent. Over nine years, counting both short term and long-term placements, Charlie had 110 kids come through his apartment on the north side of Chicago.

I was in my late 30s when I became a minister and moved to the San Jose area to begin serving my first congregation. After a few years, I applied to volunteer for a youth mentoring organization in the area called Friends for Youth. After my training, it was proposed that I be matched with a boy in middle school. He had a mother and father at home, but they had stress from physical and mental health problems and from the increasing challenge of affording an apartment in Silicon Valley. Once per week on my day off, I'd drive over to pick up the boy and take him out. Frequently we would play pool at an arcade; this allowed for an easy give and take. While there he would also play video games; this did *not* allow for much conversation.

In addition to the support I received from the agency staff, I would confide in Charlie about my experiences—both funny ones and concerning ones. The family's apartment was cluttered and unclean. This kid was a teenager, and his body odor was so terrible that after I dropped him off after an outing, my car would smell for two days. "What do I do?" Charlie suggested some simple words to encourage the boy to practice hygiene—showering, using deodorant. I found the courage to say that, but he did not answer me. Not long after, when I arrived for our weekly outing, he told me he couldn't go out. He said he had to do something else. After another failed attempt, I received a call from the agency. "They just don't have enough time," the counselor said. In other words, they had fired me. My friend Charlie told me not to take it personally.

A few years later, I applied to be a Court-Appointed Special Advocate. The role of a CASA, as you heard Andy describe it, is to provide support to babies, children, or youth in foster care placements. After several weeknights of training, they asked me to work with a teenager who happened to be in a locked facility in a rural area of the county. This boy had been both a victim of sexual abuse and a perpetrator. He had started fires in the house, in his bed. He'd run away from facilities in other counties. Nevertheless, the county social workers loved him, and they held out hope that his life could get better.

After a few initial visits in the facility cafeteria, I drove down once a week to sign him out for an outing. After a few months, however, he began to decline to meet with me. He said he was busy. In other words, I was fired. It was a relief, actually, but it was also sad. I wonder: Did it make a difference in his life to be just one more supposedly helpful stranger in a long line of them? I don't know. In any case, I hope he did receive what he needed to have a good life. I do know that it made a difference for me. It was important for me to learn a little more about what so many young people have to endure. It was humbling to feel helpless.

Now back to Charlie Kast. As I said, as a foster parent, he welcomed at least 110 children and youth into his home. Since he was single, the kids came along with him to our church—after school hours and especially on Sundays. The congregation welcomed them, whether they were with us briefly or for several months. One 12-year-old foster son stayed for three or four years. Many of us provided support, kindness, and friendship to this youth.

I'll call him Ron. Charlie had a few unmovable rules, but he also provided him with a fair amount of freedom, and he generously treated Ron to gifts for Christmas and his birthday. Charlie enjoyed being a father.

Ron was African American, and Charlie was white. So was much of the congregation as well as the gentrifying neighborhood around our church. One Sunday when Ron was a teenager, after church, Charlie went to a lunch meeting down the street at a typical Chicago diner. For some reason, Ron arrived after Charlie had. At the door, the restaurant manager said, "What do you want?" Ron said his father was inside. "Your father isn't here," the man replied, and told him to go away. When Charlie found out later, he was furious. Yet he knew that treatment of Black youth wasn't unusual in our segregated northern city.

After nine years as a minister in Chicago, Charlie was called to the UU church in Chapel Hill. The State of Illinois authorized a transfer of Ron's placement to North Carolina so Ron could move with Charlie. At the last minute, however, Ron backed out. He wanted to stay in his hometown, close to relatives. It was heartbreaking, but Charlie grieved this loss and accepted it. Many years later, Charlie received a letter from the young man—with both an apology and gratitude for his care.

Just over a year ago, Charlie had a stroke, and three months later he died. On a trip to North Carolina last summer, I was able to visit him in the nursing home. Though he was only 81 and he had walked everywhere he went (every day), Charlie was dying.

He told me: "I will die happy and in peace." *Why is that?* I asked him. He said: "Ten years ago, I realized that I had achieved my life's purpose and I would be ready for death."

I asked what his purpose was. He said: "To be the fullest expression of Charlie as possible, given genetics, environment, and other conditions. And to make the world a better place." It occurs to me that what gave him a sense of purpose in life and a sense of peace at the end of it, was the way he lived. All his generosity and service, all the patience and forgiveness.

To be sure, the love he had shown to hundreds of people had made a difference. By his examples of honesty and reliability he inspired countless children, youth, and adults, including me. Yet it also made a difference for *him* in terms of satisfaction and gratitude for life. The gifts that he shared were paid back to him in a sense of peace. In finding a sense of purpose in life, he no longer found that death was something to fear.

Often, we look at our efforts to help others as having an impact on their lives. Yet I have come to realize our commitments, our generosity, and our caring will affect our own lives too. It's often said that giving generously helps the giver as much as it does the recipient. I think this

applies in parenting and in other kinds of relationships where love is given freely, without expectation.

A week after I saw Charlie in his nursing home, I tracked down his foster son and called him on the phone. Still in Chicago, he is now in his 40s and has four children. Though he was working two jobs, he wanted to go see Charlie. “I love that man,” Ron said.

A few days later I called Ron again to tell him that Charlie had passed. We had a good conversation about our church in Chicago and about Charlie. Ron said, “Charlie was the perfect father. He used to say to me: ‘Listen, Ron. School is your job, okay? And you have to keep yourself clean and keep your stuff in order. But if you do that, you can do what you want.’” Charlie gave him freedom, and he also gave him whatever he wanted for Christmas and birthdays. For a couple of years, he put Ron in private school and paid for it.

As we ended the conversation, I said: “Ron, he loved you, and he was proud of you. He would be proud of you now.” I wish I could have told Charlie that I had made contact, and told him what Ron had said about him. I’m sure it would have touched him. On the other hand, it might not have changed Charlie’s sense of peace and satisfaction with how he had lived. His commitment to children was unwavering. He had the strength to love and to give, as well as the grace to let go of expectations for any specific results.

No matter our gender, age, or financial situation, every one of us has the ability to be generous with our presence—to really pay attention to another, even if we are together for a few short moments. We can seek the strength to show patience and humility. We can try to work on forgiving and letting go. We can find the honesty to own our mistakes.

No matter how weak or uncertain we might feel, we can find the strength to show kindness and respect. Kindness to others, and kindness to ourselves. In the days to come, let us look for the strength to love. In every day which we are given to live, let us find the strength to bring kindness and peace to our lives and our world. Amen.