

Message: “The Hidden Life”

Solomon Koduah is a 40-year old farmer in the community of Jeduako in Ghana. He tells this story,

“... my dream has been to change my community from the indiscriminate use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides to natural or organic farming methods. I have employed servant leadership skills in my engagement with my community and we are making steady progress. I have conducted some training for community members since my return from Japan and have been campaigning against chemical farming. I am very encouraged by the recent support from UMCOR-Sustainable Agriculture & Development to conduct Farmer Field Schools in Organic Agriculture and I am sure this will further improve the knowledge of the members of the community in organic farming. I have so far influenced some 50 young farmers who are practicing organic farming and are producing very healthy crops. I am sure this is also the way to go in mitigating against the effects of climate change. We will do the very best in our own small way. I am grateful to UMCOR for how far they have brought me. My family and I are fully food secure and I can now invest my time in giving back to my community. My harvest of honey yearly gives me a good enough income that pays the school fees of my four children and I hope to invest sufficiently in the education of these children so they could have a better life in the future.”¹

Solomon’s journey began 18 years ago when he and Mozart Adevu, our missionary, first met. 3,500 people live in the small community of Jeduako with 95% of them farmers. Mozart and Solomon are heroes showing people that dreams can come true. Through them the United Methodist Church in southern California is having a direct impact on lives. We are helping people to know and respect God and creation.

How is God part of your dream? I framed the question in a specific way and for a reason. I want you to think about your real motivation, what you keep hidden from others. Your big ideas, dreams and passion come from deep down inside you, your heart or as I prefer to think of it, your soul.

¹ Mozart Adevu, April 2019 newsletter, Global Ministries Missionary

The reason I ask is because whatever's most important to us is what we hold onto the hardest. When you hold onto something tightly, it begins to shape you and change you. Now that isn't always for the better. The character Golum in *The Lord of the Rings* is a fictional, unhealthy example. We all know, or have seen, people who are caricatures in some way. Humans can focus on dress, hair style, lifestyle, anything. For example, when I was in college, I was VERY focused on my course of study. One of my fraternity brothers drew this picture to poke a little fun at me. [*cartoon image of physics student*]

We all have a strong affinity or oneness with something or someone. Another way of saying it: we all have an identity. Whatever you hold onto the most is the thing that shapes you and forms you the most. It's the basis for your identity. That's what others find as they get to know you, when you finally take off the mask you wear. With or without your knowledge, what you believe in - your identity, is revealed.

What do you find when you look deep in your soul?

Don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to share. I do have to let you in on something, though: God knows. The apostle Peter taught us that "*God can't be fooled by any pretense on our part but always knows a person's thoughts*" (Acts 15:7). God is omniscient, all-knowing.

I'm not telling you this in a negative or perverted way. That's not what this is about. I'm telling you so you know the depth of God's care, the intensity of God's sorrow ... and the value of God's love. The words God spoke to Hosea show God's heart. Here's a paraphrase of Hosea 11:1-7 from *The Message*. God said,

"I loved and called to you. But when others called, you ran off and left me. You went with the cool kids. You worshipped the popular sex gods, played at faith with toy gods. Still I stuck with you. I freed you from bondage, yet you never acknowledged my help. I taught you how to walk and fed you like a baby. In return, you want to go back to your old, unhealthy ways. You're hell-bent on leaving. Is it any wonder why the murder rate skyrockets and every plan to improve things fails?" (11:1-7)

If we were God, we'd say "enough" and walk away. We'd wash our hands of the lot. But God isn't mortal. God isn't ruled by emotions.

God loves us. You hear the depth of God's heart and compassion in the next words, "*How can I give up on you? How can I turn you loose? How can I leave you to be ruined or devastated?*" (vv8-9).

That was a turning point. God took action to save us.

God's gonna roar just like Aslan in the Narnia movies. God's roar will wake us up. We'll hear good news: God isn't going to act in anger. The very idea that God would destroy us because of anger is an unbearable thought to God (Hosea 11:11). That's not the way a parent acts. That's not the way God shows steadfast, eternal love. That's not the way God keeps promises.

Paul wrote these words to the people in Colossae, "*I want you woven into a tapestry of love, in touch with everything there is to know of God. Then you will have minds confident and at rest, focused on Christ*" (Colossians 2:2, MSG). That's the way God wants things to be.

Have you heard the expression, "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken"? (Ecclesiastes 4:12) It's often used to symbolize unity at weddings. When two people come together, their life together will be strongest when Christ is at the center of their relationship, woven into every aspect of their lives. It's true for singles as well as couples. It's true for all kinds of households.

You see, we're all part of God's story. We always have been. We always will be. Whether or not we're a strong part of that tapestry of love or a weak part depends on whether or not we make Jesus the one thing that we hold onto most tightly in our soul. No one else can see inside us; it's a spiritual presence within us. It's true life, hidden deep in our soul, ready and waiting to be revealed.

It's our true identity. We're heroes and sheroes of faith when we put God at the center of our self. Just like Diana Prince and Wonder Woman or Clark Kent and Superman, people will see us and should make the connection, but won't. We're the ones who choose whom we reveal our identity to. Showing others another way to live – their superpower, is life changing. I have to warn you: the power of resurrection is even more amazing and it's real, but it won't make you bulletproof. Wake up and embrace your new life, your new identity.

You can't be part of the Justice League, but you could be part of the Grandparents' League. What a fabulous way for us to help other households with our gifts.

We're no longer bound by tradition, fashion or the distinctions of nationality, class, status, legal standing, gender or sexual orientation. Our identity is found in Christ. We aren't limited to a life shaped by things and feelings. We're free from the need to lie, to inflate our importance, from the lusts and desires that can dominate our lives. We're renewed, refreshed and made new by the power of God's love.

Paul teaches a lesson in his letter. He writes, *"If you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what's going on around Christ - that's where the action is. See things from Jesus' perspective"* (Colossians 3:1-2, MSG).

A number of years ago, I had the opportunity to hike in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. It was exhilarating, gorgeous ... and exhausting. My knees were killing me, I had to stop and catch my breath every few feet and I was delaying the group. I wanted to stop, but I didn't want to disappoint my friends.

I remember focusing on a peak and thinking, "That's my goal. I'm halfway there. Take 100 more steps. Pause, breathe. I'm 100 steps closer. Take 100 more steps. Pause, breathe..." I did that until I was 2/3 of the way there, then 3/4 of the way. Finally, I reached my goal. Hooray!

Do you know what I found? It was a false peak! We were only halfway up the mountain. My focus was too short-term. I didn't pause, look up and take the bigger picture into perspective.

God was a big part of my life that day. Not only when I got to the top and saw the beauty of God's creation, but on every step of the journey up and then back down that mountain. God was present in every moment, whether I realized it or not. That made the hike easier. My breathing calmed. I noticed the pain less. That's because I realized the few moments I would stand at peak were only a small part of the greater

journey. I needed to shift my focus: I was spending time with my best friend John on a marvelous hike, enjoying Gods' grace. It's still a very special memory to me today.

What are you focused on today? It's easy to focus on pain, anger, fear and disappointment. It's easy to focus on what divides, nostalgia, to lose ourselves in others. Those are false peaks. Don't let them become your identity.

I invite you to follow Paul's advice: embrace Jesus. Lift your eyes up and look for the presence of the Holy Spirit in every aspect of your life. When you do, you'll find Jesus with arms outstretched to welcome you. Hold onto him as tightly as you can. Let God change you, from the inside-outside. You'll be glad when you do. And, after a while, you'll find you're ready to reveal your true identity to other as a Christian, one of God's children. Alleluia.

Let us pray ...

Lord, thank you for being a God who is not ruled by anger, disappointment or human emotions. Thank you for being the very essence and meaning of love in all it's depth and glory. Give us strength for the spiritual journey each of us are living. Show us how to walk with our heads up, our eyes fixed on Jesus, the one who shows us the way. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hosea 11:1-11 (CEB)

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.

The more I called them,
the further they went from me;
they kept sacrificing to the Baals,
and they burned incense to idols.

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
I took them up in my arms,
but they did not know that I healed them.

I led them
with bands of human kindness,
with cords of love.

I treated them like those
who lift infants to their cheeks;
I bent down to them and fed them.

They will return to the land of Egypt,
and Assyria will be their king,
because they have refused to return to me.

The sword will strike wildly in their cities;
it will consume the bars of their gates
and will take everything because of their schemes.

My people are bent on turning away from me;
and though they cry out to the Most High,
he will not raise them up.

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart winces within me;
my compassion grows warm and tender.

I won't act on the heat of my anger;
I won't return to destroy Ephraim;
for I am God and not a human being,
the holy one in your midst;
I won't come in harsh judgment.

They will walk after the LORD,
who roars like a lion.
When he roars,
his children will come trembling from the west.

They will come trembling like a bird,
and like a dove from the land of Assyria;
and I will return them to their homes, says the LORD.

Colossians 3:1-11 (CEB)

Therefore, if you were raised with Christ, look for the things that are above where Christ is sitting at God's right side. Think about the things above and not things on earth. You died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

So put to death the parts of your life that belong to the earth, such as sexual immorality, moral corruption, lust, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). The wrath of God is coming upon disobedient people because of these things. You used to live this way, when you were alive to these things. But now set aside these things, such as anger, rage, malice, slander, and obscene language. Don't lie to each other. Take off the old human nature with its practices and put on the new nature, which is renewed in knowledge by conforming to the image of the one who created it. In this image there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all things and in all people.