

**Surrender and be surrounded SUMC 7/10/11 Deut.6: 5, Lev. 19:18, Matt.22: 34-40**

Despite the fact that I learned to love God early in my life, it was not until my adulthood that I understood the intimate connection of the greatest commandment. I am an immigrant American citizen born in a small village in Colombia, a traditional Roman Catholic country at that time. A missionary arrived in the town spreading the gospel and teaching a Wesleyan Way of Living by following Three simple rules: 1.Do not harm 2. Do good 3. Stay in love with God. My born-again mother had a profound influence on my spiritual upbringing with her teachings, endurance and testimony. She taught me how to pray, sing hymns, read and memorize Bible verses, and helped me to get involved in church along with my three brothers. She truly modeled God's love and service to others, and I wanted to be like her.

When I was fifteen we moved to Bogotá, the capital of Colombia. This city was a mission field. The evangelical movement was becoming strong and a revival had started in our country. I remember attending a healing campaign and one of my most profound experiences was **being healed** from a severe throat infection from which I had been suffering. I still have my tonsils despite the severe infection and they never became infected again. As a result of that wonderful experience, one vivid and strong image that I've carried with me all my life is the picture of Jesus' caring and powerful healing touch.

While I was at the university finishing my Law Degree, Campus Crusade for Christ touched my life for Jesus. At that time, I made a conscious decision to dedicate my life to Jesus Christ. I understood the amazing grace of God, His forgiveness and the purpose that God had for my life. There I was trained and equipped to build a discipleship ministry and I served as a ministry director and missionary in Colombia. My

heart was ignited by the power of the Holy Spirit to be a faithful and fruitful servant-leader. I am a relational person and there is nothing that I value more than my relationship with God, God's great commandment of love and God's great commission to make disciples for the transformation of the world.

I moved to the USA when I was in my thirties. That was a dramatic shift. My credentials as an attorney and a Christian Minister were not valid here. Since I couldn't depend on my earned credentials from Colombia for anything in the US, I learned to depend totally on God. I truly **surrendered** to God. The faith community embraced me and became my extended family. I had to start from scratch and I became a multi-tasking person. I cleaned houses. I worked as a child and a geriatric care provider. I was a nursing assistant. I became a real state agent. I was a volunteer at the Fairfax Juvenile and Domestic Court. I was trained as a Substance Abuse Counselor and I was hired by the Fairfax County Community Services Board (CSB).

I have been working with the CSB in the prevention field for 14 years now. I have reached out and been exposed to the myriad of needs that the low-income immigrant families face coming to this country: Language barriers, housing, transportation, health care, safety, immigration status, among others. For several years also, I had been a volunteer at Floris UMC in the Immigration Clinic, teaching citizenship classes, and collaborating in Grace Ministries with food and clothing distribution. In doing so, I could see the great spiritual and pastoral need for our Latin American community and the lack of culturally and spiritually competent leaders to serve them. I started experiencing a burden on my heart about this matter. I fervently prayed, shared this burden with my husband and the leaders at church and soon the Lord began to guide us to plant the Latino

Ministry at Floris. The Senior Pastor there had recognized that the Holy Spirit was ahead of us. At the same time, I started my Master of Divinity Program at Wesley Theological Seminary as a part-time student. I graduated in May 2010. Bishop Charlene Kemmerer granted me a license as a Local Pastor and appointed me last July to Sterling UMC as a part-time Associate Pastor to develop a Hispanic Latino Ministry.

It's been a fruitful year by the grace of God here at SUMC. I want to thank the staff and members of this church that have been instrumental in supporting this ministry. I praise God for my beloved husband's support toward this ministry. My mother, daughter and 3 grandkids who can't understand yet why I don't spent too much time with them due to my commitment to serve God and others. I've concentrated my efforts on reaching out to the Latino Community with success for the glory of God. We have a group of kids enrolled in the Boy Scouts troop. Three of them were recently confirmed. Three adults have become members of this church and two more families are planning on joining the congregation. Some adults have enrolled in ESL classes on site. We have a consistent attendance of 10-12 adults in our Bible study, with new people joining each week. When the church has not been available we have met in people's homes. I have been sick on a couple of occasions and people within the group have risen to lead the group. Amen! (By the way, I want to express my gratitude to the people who have been praying for me recently). We are from different nationalities (Argentina, Colombia, Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Dominican Republic, and Peru). We have developed a sense of belonging to a community of faith, and we are having an impact in the world because what is happening here in Sterling transcends frontiers. These people have been transformed and they are living testimony to their relatives and

friends not only here but in the country of origin. Extended family is very important in the Latino culture. Every Wednesday our group closes in a prayer of thanksgiving for allowing us to become part of this church to experience the love of God and for the opportunity of worshiping together on Sundays. Latino people like the fact that our ministry is an intrinsic part of this congregation. Some people were volunteers at the rummage sale, while others are looking forward to volunteer at the children's summer camp. We are growing in our relationship with God and one another. Together we are learning to love God and love our neighbor with all our being.

Let me share with you some testimonies about how God has been at work in our congregation in regards to the Latino Ministry: An English-speaking couple invited my husband and me to their house to introduce us to their Spanish-speaking neighbors. We met a young lady with a small girl. Her husband walked out on her for another woman, and as a consequence they lost their house. He left them in a house with no water and electricity. This young lady reached the end of the road and her neighbors offered her and her little girl a helping hand. They welcomed them in their home until she was able to rent an apartment. She joined the Latino Ministry and we, together accompany her in her crisis. She decided to accept Christ in her life. She surrendered herself to God's will, and now she is surrounded by God's love, grace and strength. This gladly, eagerly, obedient couple who were sensitive to their neighbor's needs and did not question God, are the perfect example of whole-heart-mind-soul love to God and neighbor.

Recently on Pentecost Sunday, a bilingual couple was desperately seeking to hear the Word of God in their Spanish native language. God led them to our church. When they arrived, the 9:30 service had already started, they heard that the service was run in

English, they wandered in the narthex, they encountered the blood donation station, until Brietta O'Neal greeted them, "Hola como esta?" Instantly their faces lighted up and started talking to her in Spanish. She immediately pulled my husband out from the sanctuary to offer them help. I was in Randy's office translating simultaneously the service. They heard a restorative healing message preached in their native language and since then they have been engaged in the activities at this church. This is another example of our efforts to be sensitive and to love God and neighbor with our entire being!

Last but not least; people who attend the 9:30 service know Jesus Esparza and his family. The Latino ministry started here with Jesus' sons getting in some trouble in their neighborhood. They messed up some flowers at the house of a member of Floris UMC who lives in their neighborhood in Sterling. Out of this lady's concern for our youth and her love for God and neighbor, she referred this family to us. Since last summer, the entire family has been faithfully engaged in our church. There is an anecdote of Jesus attending one of the UM Women meetings. Don Meyer was the only man in the meeting and when he saw Jesus arriving to the meeting, he lifted his hands and said "Thank you Jesus" experiencing relief for the company of another man. God has a sense of humor and keeps encouraging us to seek opportunities to love for God and neighbor!

The Scripture today tells us that a Pharisee, an expert in the law, tested Jesus with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the law?" Jesus replied "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the prophets hang on these two commandments".

The Law and the prophets here is equivalent to the Old Testament, which Jesus is reciting it in the New Testament. The Bible hangs on these two greatest commandments. Love is the cornerstone of the Scripture. Love here is a principle, not an emotional response. It implies giving oneself to God with one's entire person. In short it means to **surrender** oneself to God, in order to **be surrounded** by the love of God that enables us to love God in return and reflect that love to our neighbor. We are not the source of that kind of love. We love God because God loved us first. My beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, here is the core of this message. God incarnated in Jesus out of love for us. God took the shape and form of a human being (heart, soul, and mind) in Jesus to show us how to love to the point of sacrifice. Jesus walked on this earth in obedience to his Father to fulfill God's will. If Jesus is incarnated in us or in other words Jesus takes the shape and form of you, or me, transformation occurs and we are enabled to see, to love and to act the way God's sees, loves, and acts. Then we are empowered to see God in our neighbor and to love God as well as our neighbor. Then we understand Jesus' words: "For I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was naked and you clothed me, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matt.25:35). This church is placed on a hill to become a beacon to the Sterling community, so we intentionally help people enter in a relationship with God and one another. As we surrender to God's will, we will be surrounded by God's grace and power to fulfill God's greatest commandment of love for God and others.

I invite you to prayerfully consider how God may be instrumental in you to support this ministry. Lately in our worship services we have been talking about Abraham's faithful obedience, sacrificial love, and his desire to fulfill God's will. We

understand that to obey God's will is to love God and one's neighbor- and that sounds strikingly similar to Augustine's statement. If we truly do love God with all our heart, soul and mind, our entire person is focused on giving ourselves to God. We will not want to do anything contrary to his will for us. We will love our neighbors by giving ourselves to them, and if we truly love them, we will only do to them what is for their good.

Ultimate obedience to God occurs when our entire person is channeled towards loving God and others.

The mission of the UMC is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Transformation works from the inside to the outside, with the heart directing the mind, body and social relations to say yes to God. Today I invite you to surrender your entire being to God and let God surround you completely with God's grace in Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit that enables you to love God and your neighbor with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. Amen.