

*Ephesians 3: 17-19: "... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God."*

Reflection:

I am not one who has ever done well with traditional New Year's Resolutions. I certainly mean to be diligent in picking up good habits and losing unhealthy ones, but the turning of the page on the calendar doesn't seem to magically translate into personal transformation. Because of this, for the past several years I have tried on a different practice, assigning myself a theme word or phrase on New Year's Day. The hope has been that this word or phrase would shape my year, being the lens through which I look at the world and my life. I have chosen worthy enough words over the years – words like "breathe," "spaciousness," and "hope" – but though they have stuck with me longer than classic resolutions, they still haven't quite found a home in my life or my heart.

I became so fed up with my irresolute pattern that, in 2019, I didn't even bother assigning myself a word. I figured, maybe I'm just not the kind of person who can do that sort of thing "successfully," whatever that might mean. I simply opted out, and in truth I felt a fair amount of relief in doing so.

But then, midway through the year, I found myself preparing for what I knew was going to be a difficult conversation with two people I care about who were in the midst of very painful conflict. They disagreed on more issues than they agreed on, frankly, but for practical reasons they needed to be able to work on some tough stuff together. My role in the conversation was to be something of a spiritual companion and referee, and to help them keep themselves from descending into mutual derision and strife. The tricky thing was that, though the conflict was not mine, I was not exactly a neutral party; I happened to share the beliefs of one of the people, and found the other's positions to be really tough to swallow. So I needed to be able to be clear and steady for both of them, and not veer into taking sides, which would be all too easy to do.

My mind was churning as I picked out what to wear to the encounter. I wanted to be confident and to radiate peace, and oddly, dressing the part seemed to matter. So I asked the question I always ask when choosing clothing for important events: "How do I want to *feel* on this occasion?" And the answer came immediately: "rooted and grounded in love."

And there it was: my word not just for 2019 but hopefully for the rest of my life. It's a powerful word, and one I've returned to again and again as I make my way through our fractured world. The divides in our nation are so deep and undeniable, and sometimes cynicism and even despair take up far too much space in my heart. But when I feel myself truly rooted and grounded in Love – the foundational Love of Christ that is unendingly broad and long and high and deep – I become less entrenched in my own sense of my "rightness" and more able to be transformed and help others be transformed by Love and for love.

Prayer: *Love, as a light illumine and guide me. Love, as a shield o'ershadow and cover me. Love be under me; Love be over me; Love be beside me on left hand and right. Love be before me, behind me, about me. Love this day be within me and without me.* (I recite this excerpt from the well-known Celtic prayer "St. Patrick's Breastplate" daily, often replacing the name "Christ" with "Love, in recognition of the fact that that in Christ, God's nature and name as Love is made known.)

Rev. Susie Webster-Toleno has been the pastor of the Congregational Church (UCC) of Westminster West since 2002, and is also a hospice spiritual counselor with Bayada Hospice.