

Let us pray: God, make these words Your word, and our hearts your heart. Amen.

One summer I was vacationing at my family's cottage in Michigan. Sunday morning rolled around, and my mother and I planned to go to church. But she started to feel unwell, and decided she couldn't go. I was feeling spiritual, so I decided to have a holy morning on the water.

Our cottage fronts on one lake, and there is another behind us, across the road. I decided to carry a kayak over to North Lake and explore that for a change. I went all around it, and then saw a weeping willow whose fronds came all the way to the water. Paddling closer, I looked from the tree's base in the water to its top high in the sky; and realized I had come to church after all. I had happened upon a cathedral, old, majestic, capacious enough for mystery. A choir of birds led hymns of praise; leaves whispering in the breeze murmured prayers; the sermon was my awareness. I looked for an altar, and found no need of one - the whole place was sacred. I went to church in that tree and found God.

Blessed are those who delight in the Lord;
they are like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither; everything they do shall prosper.

Trees planted by the water – I can't think of a better image for our life in God. A tree is a complex organism, like we are. It is both nourished and stabilized by its root system, as we are by our grounding. In the Bible – our ancient story; in worship, where the ordinary becomes sacred; in the church – the traditions handed down from the apostles. A tree grows toward the sky, developing an ever-thickening trunk to hold its life, just as we aim ourselves God-ward, adding layers of experience in faith. It develops branches that reach out far and wide, extending its reach and providing places for birds and creatures to nest and run and forage; just as we express our faith in ever widening circles of nurturing, making space for people of all sorts to explore God and be nourished. It grows leaves that help nurture it, and create shade that helps other organisms, just as we clothe ourselves in spiritual practices and patterns of caring.

And in season, if the tree is healthy, it will develop fruit that nourishes many,
just as our thriving in Christ will inevitably yield abundant fruit
of lives transformed, wounds healed, justice unleashed.

This is my hope and prayer for both our churches.

It is why this tree metaphor has such life for us – rooted, reaching up, reaching out,
providing shade and fruit – that encompasses God’s call to us as Christ’s body.

But that just describes a single tree.

Scientists are discovering that trees exist in community just as we do.

They are nurtured and protected in vast networks of fungi and other organisms
which carry not only nutrients and water, but also messages and safety.

One of the scientists who’s helped bring this reality to light is Suzanne Simard,
whose book “Finding the Mother Tree” is on many people’s reading lists.

Her research helped to confirm the existence of these neural networks.

And beyond that, she discovered that certain trees function particularly to
nurture the growth of others. She calls them Mother Trees, and they,
and this network, “heals, feeds and sustains the other members of the forest.”

Can you think of a better description of mission than that?

For each one of us is part of a forest – we are not trees unto ourselves.

And each church is part of a forest – we are not churches unto ourselves.

We are part of our Diocesan forest, and our national Episcopal church and global
Anglican forests; which are part of the worldwide community of churches.

And we are part of our regional forest – I spent time this week meeting with other
area churches in as part of the 4th Century in Southern Maryland Initiative,
which is asking how our Episcopal churches in this region might become
more effective and collaborative and sustainable in God’s mission.

We’re also part of the forest of other churches here in our immediate area,
and of other faith communities. This forest is vast and deep!

What if thought of ourselves more as forests than trees?

Just maybe, if we were sharing nutrients and collaborating in our forests, we’d
be better equipped to live into these words Jesus shared with his followers.

This is not my favorite passage – it’s too “there and later, either/or” for me;
Jesus usually conveyed the Realm of God as a “here and now, both/and”
enterprise. But I do know that as forests we can weather times of
hunger and of plenty, sorrow and joy, abundance and scarcity.

And Jesus was definitely a Mother Tree, whose mission it was to bring others into relationship with God, and to see them whole and thriving.

That is our mission, in his name – to be Mother Trees who heal, feed and sustain other members of the forest.

That is what we're about in Tending Our Soil, gaining clarity about just what kind of trees we are, what is the nature of the forests in which we thrive, and how we might better join God in healing, feeding and sustaining this forest.

Those are questions we ask as Christ Church. They're also for us to answer.

What kind of tree are you? Would you like to be?

What kind of forest are you a part of?

Where are you drawing nourishment?

Where are you not getting enough nutrients, or feeling dry?

Who might have those for you – and who might you be called to share yours with?

Certainly, we can be providing more for each other through the spiritual practices we take up and share with each other.

These small groups we're forming for Lent will be networks for giving and receiving spiritual sustenance and support for living.

In fact, I'd like for us to spend Lent going deeper into this notion of trees, roots, branches, leaves, fruits and forests. It has life for us.

God has life for us. We have life for each other, and for this weary world.

At the very end of the Bible, we have a tree standing by water. Revelation 22:1-2.

Listen: Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

That's us, my friends. The Spirit is the river and we are mighty trees, and our leaves are for the healing of the nations.

All nations. All people. All love.

Amen

Luke 6:17-26

Jesus came down with the twelve apostles and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets."

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

"Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

"Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

"Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

Psalm 1:1-3

1 Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked,
nor lingered in the way of sinners,
nor sat in the seats of the scornful!

2 Their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and they meditate on his law day and night.

3 They are like trees planted by streams of water,
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither;
everything they do shall prosper.