

Pentecost 21, Proper 24, Track 2-Year B

October ,17, 2021

All Saints', Littleton, NH

The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Isaiah 53: 4-12

Psalm 91: 9-16

Hebrews 5: 1-10

Mark 10: 35-45

The Kingdom of God is like a Tree

This morning's lessons have to do with Jesus being the one who suffered for many, and through his sufferings, submission, and self-offering he became the way to salvation for all. In the gospel lesson this pattern of self-offering and servanthood is the way that Jesus prescribes for his followers. I'd like to explore this idea a little in a different way.

Do you know how Jesus often taught in parables and analogies? He'd say, 'The kingdom/or reign of God is like a mustard seed, like a vine, like a prodigal son', etc. This morning I have my own 'kingdom of God' analogy for you: the reign of God is like a tree! I thought I'd 'branch' out on this, dig into the 'roots' of the analogy to discover what 'seeds' of truth are there that can bear 'fruit', .... until you beg me to 'leaf' you alone! Ok, enough with the bad puns!

I've been appreciating the beauty of the trees as we do this time of year and pondering what a gift they are to us. It reminded me of one of the books I read on sabbatical: *The Overstory*, by Richard Powers. This book is a novel and starts off by

introducing you to a diverse bunch of people with their own stories, but initially unrelated, and gradually weaves their lives together with the common theme of trees. You learn a lot about trees in reading this book, and mostly on how wonderful, useful, giving, and connected they are in ways that we are just beginning to discover; and how, really, much of the world depends on the health of trees and forests.

I'm going to share a long quote from the book to give you a little flavor of the book and the things you learn by reading it. This section is about one of the characters, Patricia, who is a scientist and a researcher of trees, where she is writing about her discoveries – which are not just made-up stuff for a novel, but real truths about trees.

All winter she has struggled to describe the joy of her life's work and the discoveries that have solidified in a few short years: how trees talk to one another, over the air and underground. How they care and feed each other, orchestrating shared behaviors through the networked soil. How they build immune systems as wide as a forest. She spends a chapter detailing how a dead log gives life to countless other species. Remove the snag [log] and kill the woodpecker who keeps in check the weevils that would kill the other trees.....She tells how the woody-coned alders harvest gold. How an inch high pecan might have six feet of root. How the inner bark of birches can feed the starving.....How poplars clean soils of chlorinated solvents and willows remove heavy metals.

She lays out how fungal hyphae – countless miles of filaments folded up in every spoon of soil – coax open tree roots and tap into them. How the wired-up fungi feed the tree minerals. How the tree pays for these nutrients with sugars, which the fungi can't make.

Something marvelous is happening underground, something we're just learning how to see. Mats of mycorrhizal cabling link trees into gigantic, smart communities spread across hundreds of acres. Together, they form vast trading networks of goods, services, and information....

There are no individuals in a forest, no separable events. The bird and the branch it sits on are a joint thing. A third or more of the food a big tree makes may go to feed other organisms. Even different kinds of trees form partnerships. Cut down a birch, and a nearby Douglas fir may suffer...

In the great forests of the East, oaks and hickories synchronize their nut production to baffle the animals that feed on them. Word goes out, and the trees of a

given species – whether they stand in sun or shade, wet or dry – bear heavily or not at all, together, as a community...

Forests mend and shape themselves through subterranean synapses. And in shaping themselves, they shape, too, the tens of thousands of other, linked creatures that form it from within. Maybe it's useful to think of forests as enormous spreading, branching, underground super-trees. (p 217-218)

So, are you starting to get the gist of my use of trees as an analogy for following Jesus into the kingdom of God? Just like trees, when we are living in the kingdom or realm of God we are connected in ways that even we can't see at times. We provide shelter, nourishment, healing, to all kinds of creatures great and small. Trees are constantly offering themselves to so many, and even in their dying they provide sustenance for others. What a wonderful analogy for the self-giving way of living that Jesus modeled and taught. And isn't it interesting that the writer of the book of Acts refers to Jesus being hung not on a cross, but 'on a tree' in 3 places (Acts 5:30, 10:39, 13:29). I wonder if the writer had some inkling of the giving nature of trees?!

And there are many different kinds of trees just like we are all different, but we need each other and are connected to each other by this great invisible web. What kind of tree would you be if you were a tree: oak, maple, birch, cherry, hemlock, spruce, pine or poplar, ...and what about pecan, walnut, almond---yes, some are just various kinds of 'nuts' – you know who you are! The underground, unseen connection of trees reminds me of that other dimension, that other realm, where we know all things are connected and unified in God. It makes me wonder if in fact the trees and all creation know all this instinctively and they look at us humans and wonder and hope we get how connected we all are and how we need each other for planetary survival. Paul

writes a wonderful passage that sounds like this in his letter to the Romans when he says, “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God...” (8: 19)

I think it is also interesting that the first and last book of the Bible have trees right in the center of the story. In Genesis God creates all trees and especially the ‘tree of life’: “Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” (2:9) And at the end of the book of Revelation there is a description of heaven where there is a ‘river of the water of life’: “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.” (22:2)

So, trees are a good analogy for living a life in the realm of God. If we stay connected to one another we create this great web of strength that provides food for our world, healing, shelter, resilience, and, if we have lived well, our legacy after us will spiritually feed others and nourish the soil – the community – we leave behind.