

WGUMC October 19, 2014 Gardeners of Grace
Mark 4:1-9

According to geologists, Santa Clara Valley is a structural trough. It is not a valley formed by erosion but by mountain building. That means it didn't lose all its topsoil. Besides that, underlying the valley is an aquifer, and closer to the bay there were once natural artesian wells. So this place wasn't called the Valley of Heart's Delight for nothing. It had good soil, water, and a mild climate. It was a perfect place to sow seeds.

But the Rev. Hubert Doran came to the Bay Area not as a farmer but as a gardener of grace. Ruby's dad came to sow the Word of God. I know he served Eastside Methodist Episcopal Church on Soquel Avenue in Santa Cruz in the 1940's, about the time the church changed its name to Grace Methodist, so that folks wouldn't confuse it with the Eastside Tavern across the street. (I was appointed to the same church in 1999.)

Ruby tells stories about being a PK and likes to share how her father and some other evangelical leaders started Redwood

Christian Park in 1950 because they wanted a camp where they could impress upon young people the importance of making a personal commitment to Jesus Christ.

Both dad and daughter loved it there. They must have felt some kinship with the trees. I say that because Rev. Doran and Ruby both belong to a unique species known as "spiritual redwoods."

Now think about redwoods. It doesn't matter how long we've lived around them, we are still fascinated by them. As you know, they are the tallest living things on earth, reaching heights of over 350 feet. I don't know about her dad, but Ruby sure isn't very tall. Nevertheless, she is one of our giants if you measure spiritual growth. For many of us, she has set the bar pretty high for loving God through prayer and Bible study, attending worship, serving in the local church, visiting the homebound, extending hospitality to strangers, and going around the world on mission trips. Most of us would have to

live as long as a redwood tree to do all that she has done for God.

As a group, redwoods are very long-lived. The oldest Coast Redwood we know about is 2200 years old, so it was nearly full grown by the time Jesus was born. Ruby isn't quite that old, but she, too, has been around a long time. She was born in England at the start of World War I. That was also the year the Panama Canal opened, Mother's Day became a national holiday, Charlie Chaplin made his first film and Babe Ruth hit his first home run for the Red Sox.

It's hard to imagine all that Ruby has been through in 100 years. But she is pretty tough, just like a redwood. A large redwood tree has bark that is nearly a foot thick. It has lots of tannin in it to protect the tree from insects. And it doesn't have any resin or pitch, which makes the tree is resistant to fire. Ruby doesn't have a bark, but she has the whole armor of God instead—the belt of truth, the shield of faith and the

helmet of salvation. Not only that, she has a will you don't want to mess with. I dropped by Thursday afternoon when she wasn't feeling well. So I asked if she thought she'd be able to make it today. She answered, "Come hell or high water."

You might say that Ruby is strong and independent, and that would be true. But as a spiritual redwood, she has always been interconnected, too. Consider this: Have you ever seen a redwood growing all by itself? Redwood trees need each other or they would fall over. That's because they have no taproot. Their roots are shallow and grow laterally. But as they grow, they intermingle with the root systems of other trees to form a strong foundation for the whole grove. I think that's a wonderful metaphor for Christian community, and no one practices it quite like Ruby. She knows that you can't be a Christian all by yourself. You can't learn how to love others if you have no others to love. For her, the church has always been her big extended family. And how firm a foundation!

Still, no matter how tough we are, there will be times when bad things happen to us. When Ruby's husband Dale died just short of their 50th wedding anniversary was one of those times. More recently, when she fell and broke a bone and then when she was diagnosed with lung cancer. But let me tell you something about redwoods. When they get injured or diseased, they form a burl. And inside that burl are un-sprouted buds. So if anything should happen to the tree, a new tree can grow from the burl. In fact, more redwoods grow from sprouts on the roots or burls of a living tree than grow from seeds. This incredible capacity for regeneration helps explain why there have been redwoods on the planet for 240 million years.

Through hell and high water, Ruby has used the gift she has been given for spiritual regeneration. For many of us, she has taken our injured souls and coaxed their dormant buds into new life. She has been teaching us all her life that every time it

seems as if the world is coming to an end, new life is just waiting to begin.

There is no better way to give thanks for Ruby than to grow some spiritual redwoods around her. In the forest, it's called a fairy ring. Here in the church, it's a faith ring. So let's commit ourselves to growing a ring of spiritual redwoods here in Willow Glen.

To do that, we need some good seed; we have the Word of God. We need some good soil; we have the church of God. We need some gardeners; we have the people of God.

Let's start with the Word of God that we will need in order to grow this garden of grace. In the Book of Malachi, we find these words: "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse...and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing." [Malachi 3:10]

Ruby has long practiced tithing, giving a tenth of her income to the work of God. For us baby redwoods, that may be something we have to grow up to. So we begin by making a pledge, even if all we can afford is a few dollars a week. I sure couldn't afford to tithe back when I was the half-time pastor in Santa Cruz, Hank and I were both in graduate school and Kristen was in daycare. But I made a pledge and have increased it every year since. Now I tithe on my cash salary, but not on the value of the parsonage. For me, as for a redwood tree, there is always room for growth.

All I ask of you is that you start somewhere. Remember, every tree on the Avenue of the Giants started out as a little sprout. But with good soil and enough moisture, young redwoods can grow very fast. So if you have the resources, by all means, reach for the sky. You'll be 30, 60, 100 feet tall before you know it. And God's grace will grow in you, yielding 30, 60, 100-fold, as long as you give God your very best.

Be sure you know that giving God your best doesn't mean just giving up material comforts for God. It also means giving spiritual comfort to others. It means nurturing all the sprouts that are growing up around you. Yes, I know. Like a coast redwood, you have been through fire, drought, disease and even the threat of the chain saw. You've sustained many wounds through the years and now your bark is all gnarled up. But those burls are what makes you so beautiful, and in fact, they are priceless. So don't let anyone poach them! Instead, use the burls that have formed in your own soul to give new life and hope and strength to others.

Ruby expects nothing less and wants nothing more than for us to be gardeners of grace, to sow the Word and to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength and with all our mind and to love all God's children as ourselves. The very best gift we could give her today would be to make a commitment to do just that. So be it. Let's do it.