

WGUMC July 21, 2019
John 15:1-17

“Jesus: The Giving Tree”

This is the fourth and last in a short series of sermons about trees. By now you are probably wondering. While you can see how meditating on a tree might get a person thinking about God, what does all this “treeology” have to do with Christianity? Isn’t this all a bit New Age-y?

I promised in the weekly email to talk about Jesus today, and I want to begin by reminding you of the old Shel Silverstein book, *The Giving Tree*. You know the story. The tree loved the boy and the boy loved the tree. The boy would pile her leaves and climb her trunk and swing from her branches and eat her apples. That made the tree happy. But as the boy grew older, he didn’t play around the tree much anymore.

He only came back when he wanted something. As a young man, he wanted money, so the tree gave him her apples to sell in the city. When he was getting established, he wanted a house, so the tree gave him her branches to build one. Later—I suspect that it

was at midlife—he wanted a boat. The tree gave him her trunk so he could carve out a boat and sail away. Now the tree was just a lonely stump. Eventually, the man grew old and one day came back. He didn't want anything but a place to rest, so the tree invited him to sit down, and he did. And the tree was happy.

Many a sermon has been preached comparing the story of the Giving Tree with the story of Jesus. But there's something wrong here. As a parable, it's backwards, because the story of Jesus doesn't end with a stump; it begins with one.

The story of Jesus begins with a prophecy. In the midst of war, the Prophet Isaiah proclaims, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse....” [Isaiah 11:1] The stump Isaiah is talking about is the nation of Judah. Her army is no match for the enemy and the people are afraid. Then comes the prophet, promising that a shoot will come up from that old stump. A new king will be born. A Messiah will come to save God's people.

Many people didn't believe him that there was any life left in that stump. That's because they didn't live in redwood country. But we do and we know better. Just look at the stumps of the trees the loggers cut down a century ago and you'll see what I mean. A redwood stump is anything but dead, and it makes an excellent stage for the drama of new life to begin.

Remember that whenever you feel cut down, whenever you fear there is little life left in you. God can do amazing things with a stump. Hundreds of years later, a shoot did come up from the stump of Jesse, from the lineage of King David. In the days of Caesar Augustus, Jesus was born. Then, Luke says, "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him." [2:40]

Now everyone was wondering who he was. Was he the Son of David? Was he John the Baptist or Elijah? Was he the Messiah? In John's Gospel, Jesus tells them who he is. He says, "I am the Bread of Life" in John 6; "I am the Good Shepherd" in John 10; "I am the

way and the truth and the life” in John 14. And “I am the true vine” in John 15.

It’s quite possible that by calling himself the True Vine, Jesus was comparing himself to the degenerate vine that the Prophet Jeremiah had complained about long ago when the people were going after false gods. You see, God had planted the people of Israel as a cultivated vine, but they went wild and could no longer yield good grapes. [Jeremiah 2:21]

When Jesus comes along, he is not a degenerate but a true vine, and he is growing up to reconnect the people with their true God. The only thing Jesus was wild about was saving the world. And so as this vine grew bigger and reached out farther and began to bear more and more good fruit, the pressure to cut it down grew, too.

As you know, there’s another tree in the Jesus story. It’s the tree of Calvary, otherwise known as the cross, and Jesus the True Vine was nailed to it. What the Romans didn’t know is that Jesus

was like English Ivy. Now anyone who's ever had ivy in their yard knows that you can't kill it. You can cut it down, but in just a few short days, it will rise up again. So even though the Romans put Jesus on their tree of death, God had the power to turn it into a tree of everlasting life.

Not only did Jesus come back to life, but he keeps trying to come back into our lives. Why? Because, like the Giving Tree in Silverstein's story, he wants us be happy. But unlike that tree, he doesn't just want us to climb in his branches. He wants us to BE his branches so that we can bear fruit for his world. In other words, Jesus didn't give his life for us so we could go away, do our own thing, and only come back when we wanted something. He gave us his life so that we could have it and share it abundantly. [John 10:10]

If we want that life, we have to be grafted into the Vine. We have to abide there; we can't just visit it from time to time. Christ is the Source of the only life that is worth all the trouble of living and

we can no more truly live without him than a branch can live without the vine.

As you know, a vine brings both water and nutrients up from the roots in the soil so that the leaves on its branches can do the work of the plant and enable it to reproduce. Likewise, Jesus supplies us with living water and all the nourishment we need to do God's work and to bear fruit for God's kin-dom. But we can't do our own work, let alone God's work, if we don't abide in the vine. If we cut ourselves off, we die.

No one knows this better than someone who has been in recovery. They know what it's like to cut themselves off and die and come back to life again. Yesterday I was with a group of folks who have spent years getting themselves re-grafted back into the vine of life. They are proof it can be done. It's a beautiful thing to see.

But what is life in the vine like for you and me? Jesus says, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." That's what the little boy in

Silverstein's book did. He wanted money, a house, a boat, and the tree gave him all those things. But if we ask Jesus for lots of stuff will he give it to us? I don't think so.

There's a big difference between the tree in the book and the True Vine in the Bible. While the tree gave the boy everything he wanted, the True Vine transforms what it is that we want. When we abide in Christ, our desires begin to change. Money, houses, boats, jobs, relationships aren't what it's about anymore. Instead of asking God for what we want, we start to want what God is asking of us.

That doesn't mean we stop asking for things entirely. But if we pray for and don't get a cure for cancer or an end to war, it's because those things are not what's keeping us from being connected to Christ. Everything we need to abide in the vine, God will freely give us. And when we abide in the vine, there is nothing else we could ever want or need for we will already have the one who fills all in all. [Ephesians 1:23]

If Christ is all we want and all we get, then Christ is all we have to give. That makes us as fruitful as the trees that used to fill this valley. Most of the cherries and apricots and prunes are gone, but we are still here, and it is harvest time.

The Building Hope Mission Team is leaving Saturday morning to go build houses in Tijuana. We ask you to pray, not because we think we are going to end poverty by building two houses, not because we think our efforts to help a couple of families in Mexico is going to resolve our immigration fiasco. But we do believe that your prayers will help us keep connected to Christ the True Vine. While Christ is the vine, we are the branches, and he is relying on us to deliver his love by building fruitful relationships across the border. We can't end the crisis, which these brothers and sisters did not create, but we can bring them a little more Christ. That way they will at least have more joy.

Your branch doesn't have to reach as far as Mexico. You can bear baskets of fruit for God's kin-dom right here as long as you

keep connected to Christ, who in our story started out as a stump, grew into a vine, and has become for us the tree of life. It is a living tree and a giving tree, because it gives us a real, deep and supremely joyful life.

And that about sums up my treeology, my thoughts on how one can learn something about God and connecting to Christ by spending time in the trees. This summer, I have encouraged you to go off into the forest to deepen your faith. But to put it into practice, you need people. There is a forest of humanity in this city that is waiting for us to reach out and introduce them to the love of God in Christ Jesus and, believe me, when we do, all the trees of the field will clap their hands.