

Rooted and Grounded in Christ's Love

Jeremiah 17:5-10, Ephesians 3:14-19

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

January 9, 2022

A prayer for the Ephesians and, I would say, for us, too.

*For this reason, I kneel before the Father,
from whom every family in heaven and on earth
derives its name.*

*I pray that out of his glorious riches
he may strengthen you with power
through his Spirit in your inner being,
so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.*

*And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love,
may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people,
to grasp how wide and long and high and deep
is the love of Christ,
and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—
that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.
(Ephesians 3:14-19, NIV)*

Giant sequoias can grow to over three hundred feet tall,
weigh over twelve million pounds,
and are known to have lived over three thousand years.

In terms of sheer size,
there is no other tree
that comes close to the giant sequoia,
and there are trees standing today
that were alive when David became king over Israel.

For centuries, for millennia, these quiet giants have withstood
the ravages of wind, lightning strikes, infestations, and fires.

The recent, more intense fires brought about by climate change
have tested this resilience,
but sequoias actually depend on fires to survive and thrive.

Fires clear the area around sequoias,
burn off different types of harmful fungi,
and recycle nutrients into the ground,
giving seeds the soil, the space, and the conditions to take root.

A sequoia seed is the size of a pinhead,
and, like all living things,
it must be nurtured and nourished to flourish.

“Rooted and grounded in Christ’s love.”

That’s the theme that we’ll be working with throughout 2022.

Through feedback received from last year’s congregational review,
informal conversations and more recent surveys,
the Spiritual Leadership Team has been listening and discerning
who we are, what we need, and where we are going a
as a congregation.

We settled on two things,
although there’s certainly more work ahead, for all of us,
about how we’ll live into them.

First, we need to tend to our roots, to nurture, to nourish
the ground, the soil, the foundation from which we grow.

And, second, we need to tend to our branches,
to determine how and where God is asking us to grow and extend.

Of course, these aren’t particularly profound.
Whether we pay attention to them or not,
we’re called to do those two things all the time.

But, maybe, given our current realities,
we have come to a deeper, clearer sense
of both their importance and how we’ve taken them for granted.

In a couple ways, COVID-19 has spread and lingered like a wildfire.

The first, most obvious similarity is that it’s been destructive.

There’s so much that’s been lost.

We all know the many different types of losses
and the statistics to go with them --
an estimated five and a half million people worldwide have died
833,000 in this nation alone --
some of whom we know by name,
some of whom we love, deeply.

We haven’t been able to carry out our normal rituals of grief --
a loss heaped on top of a loss.

The pandemic has put a strain on all of us,
and health care providers, teachers, retail workers --
everyone whose jobs serve the masses --
have felt this strain acutely and continue to do so.

Some of you have described a sense of isolation,
a loss of connection with family, with friends, with the church,
with God.

It’s been hard. It continues to be hard.

This pandemic, this continuing fire, has cost so much,
and it continues to burn into the horizon.

And we wonder, what will emerge, can anything good *possibly* emerge,

from the ash-covered dirt?
Sometimes, the work of the church is to name the hard things we face
and to allow them . . . to be hard.

But what if this pandemic is not simply something that we need to recover *from*?
What if we understand it like those fires on which those sequoias depend --
clearing a space that is free from our clutter
so that the light of Christ can shine freely upon our heads,
conditioning the soil of our bodies and souls,
so that we may better identify and receive what we need to grow in faith,
and burning away everything that quenches the Spirit from moving among us
so that we may grow up and extend out like those giant sequoias,
towering witnesses to God's reign in both heaven and on earth.

For this reason.

That's how writer identified as Paul introduces the prayer
that we have before us.

For this reason, I kneel before the Father,
from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.

For this reason.

Those words are Paul's way of telling his readers
that what he is about to write, to pray,
encompasses the words that came before them.

Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus
ushers us into a wormhole
that hurls us backwards through space and time
into another dimension,
until we arrive at the very beginning,
the very essence, the soil from which all things come into being --
the reason why we are here, together, this morning.

But what is that reason?

The writer identified as Paul begins his letter like this:

"To the saints in Ephesus who are faithful in Christ Jesus."

Paul writes that he has heard of the Ephesians' faith in Jesus
and of their love for each other.

For this reason, he writes -- the first time he uses that phrase --
he is constantly giving thanks to God.
Ephesians, chapter 1, verse 15.

Paul then goes on to explain what their faith means,
the mystery that it reveals.

And the mystery is this:

Christ is our peace.
Christ has made us one.

Christ has broken down the dividing walls of hostility.
Christ has created in his body one new humanity in place of two.

For this reason, Paul writes,
the second time he uses this phrase -- Chapter 3, verse 1 --
he has been called by God to this ministry of reconciliation in the name of Jesus
to the proclamation of God's grace for all in the name of Jesus,
and to suffering in prison for the sake of the Gentiles in the name of Jesus.

Paul isn't proclaiming a wish that sometime, somewhere things will be better,
when he will be free from his chains, from his forced isolation,
from all the restraints on his time and movement.

I'm sure he wished for all of those things.

No, what Paul proclaims is a present reality --
a present reality that transcends his and our present circumstances.

For this reason, Paul prays for God to strengthen the church through the Spirit.

Paul prays that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith.

Paul prays that we, the church, will be rooted and grounded in love
so that we may know Christ's love,
a love that is wider, and longer, and higher, and deeper
than our minds can possibly comprehend,
a love that fills us to the measure of the fullness of God,
a love that grows, reaches, and extends into the lives of others.

Rooted and grounded in Christ's love.

For all their awe-inspiring grandeur,
giant sequoias depend on a root system
that must spread far and wide below the ground
to support their massive height and weight above it.

Their roots can extend 150 to 200 feet
meaning that one giant sequoia
can have an area of influence over
four square acres of forest land.

Most of a giant sequoia's root system is made up of tiny, threadlike feeders,
and they intertwine with the roots of other sequoias.¹

This interconnectedness is what gives them their resilience,
the ability to grow to massive heights and to live for thousands of years.²

They support each other.

They hold each other up.

¹ California Department of Parks and Recreation (quoting John H. Engbeck, Jr, *The Enduring Giants*); https://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=1151.

² "Are sequoias part of one root system?," *Study.com*; <https://study.com/academy/answer/are-sequoias-part-of-one-root-system.html>

They nurture and nourish each other
to flourish together.

When we think of a church,
What are those roots, what is that ground,
from which new things can grow?
What has this wildfire revealed for us to see more clearly?

Let me propose some things that I've been thinking about,
but I'm sure that you can add others.

We need each other.
We can't live in complete isolation and we can't survive on our own strength.
We need and depend on our connections with others.
and so we need the space and the time
to tend to those relationships, to renew them,
both inside and outside the church.

We need rest.
We often fill our days with many things, too much activity, too much work.
How can we follow and dwell with the good shepherd beside the still waters
if we are in perpetual motion?

We need joy.
We need to share it with others
we need to receive it from others,
we need to experience it and celebrate it with others.

Yes, we lament our losses, we allow hard things to be hard,
but, at the same time, we remember
and live into the joy that has been set before us,
to help us endure whatever we may face.

And we need humility.
There's a reason why Paul began his letter to the Ephesians
with teachings about grace.

We will not live and thrive by our own strength,
but, through Christ, and the outpouring of the Spirit
we have been called to reconciliation with God, with others, with creation.

Over the next few weeks, we are going to explore
how the Sabbath is a gift from God,
an invitation for us to stop our work, to be still before God,
to rest our minds, bodies and souls,
to embrace and to be embraced in our relationships with others,
and to celebrate the joy that God has set before us in Christ.

*Thus says the Lord:
Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals
and make mere flesh their strength,*

*whose hearts turn away from the Lord.
They shall be like a shrub in the desert,
and shall not see when relief comes.
They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness,
in an uninhabited salt land.*

*Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,
whose trust is the Lord.
They shall be like a tree planted by water,
sending out its roots by the stream.
It shall not fear when heat comes,
and its leaves shall stay green;
in the year of drought it is not anxious,
and it does not cease to bear fruit.
(Jeremiah 17:5-8, NRSV)*

Rooted and grounded in Christ's love.
Laura and Randy Horst created the display
hanging on the wooded portion of this wall up front.
If you come and look closely,
you will see that it does not represent something that is static,
something fixed in place.
No, something is growing and emerging
for this wall and for us.
Underneath the ash-covered dirt,
a speck of a seed takes root.