

“Roots”

Third in a series on Being a Tree of Life
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Psalm 63

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How can a tree continue to live and grow, when it has been uprooted?

We're a tree. That's what I'm asking you to imagine with me these days. Imagine our church communities, our congregations — Bethany UC, Elora UC, and whoever else you belong to — imagine us together as a tree. We are a tree of Jesus. By him, through him, and for him everything is made. All of life. We are a tree of Jesus' life.

A tree is a whole, an integrated system. But it has parts. Our tree-of-life congregation has parts, different aspects of our life together.

We've looked at our “leaves and fruit.” When, from a distance, you approach a tree, you see the leaves first. Our “leaves” are what others see and experience of us. Our fruit is what we have to give. Our leaves and fruit are for healing and nourishment. The Spirit grows them in us, so we can join Jesus work of healing and feeding our world, our neighbourhoods, our neighbours.

Wherever we go, surely God is in those places. Do you notice? Jesus is inviting you to join in with what he is doing in the lives of others and the communities you're part of.

He also brings us together to work on things. I called this our “anchor cause.” An anchor cause is a specific need. The whole congregation shares together in God's mission of healing and feeding for that need. I asked you to consider what ours might be.

II

Today, let's dig into another part of our tree. Yes, dig. Go underground, where the roots are.

Roots feed, connect, and anchor the tree.

Roots feed. Roots absorb water and minerals from the soil, the things that nourish and build the tree. Basic nutrients, like carbon and sugars. Others too, a multitude of minerals, tree vitamins. Roots feed the tree.

Roots connect. I've been learning from Suzanne Simard, a researcher in BC. She's shown how tree roots connect into a vast network of fungi that runs through the soil. The fungi help feed the tree, and the tree helps feed the fungi. The fungi also connect its roots with other trees. Trees can share nutrients, and even warn each other of

danger from insects or disease. Roots connect the tree with others.¹

Roots anchor. They hold the tree firm to the ground. Storms and winds come, maybe floods, even people swinging into them. Roots keep trees from knocking over. They anchor the tree.

But what about when the tree, like us, feels uprooted?

III

A few weeks ago, I talked about these times we're in. Let me tell it as a parable. Instead of a tree, though, let's imagine our church congregation as travellers on a river.

We've been in a nice, big boat that holds us all. Like one of those river cruise boats. We've travelled together for a long, long time. Many of us haven't known any different. This boat — not just our church building, but all aspects of our life together — it's been serving us well. Along the way, we've made changes, patched things up, stopped at different ports of call. The scenery changed. We've adjusted, and cruised along.

Lately, the water's been speeding up and getting choppier. We've hit some rapids. Come close to beaching a few times. Some have been feeling seasick. There are fewer of us too. Folks have been getting off, and fewer coming aboard. Some we've loved and counted on have been transferred to the great cruise ship, *Paradise*. Our boat's been getting more temperamental, harder to keep going, and running low on fuel. We've been wondering how long it could go on. Still, we've kept cruising.

Then, a hundred weeks ago to be exact, we went over the falls.

We're still going over. It's been a long free fall. We're already getting some idea of what it will be like when our tumbling is done.

- Bewildering. What just happened?
- Lost. Where are we now?
- Injured. We're all wounded, some badly.
- Some haven't made it. We're fewer than we were.
- The river below the falls, it's different. Not as deep. Marshy, like a bayou. Our good old cruise boat won't work here.
- Anyway, it's smashed up real good. Parts of it, good parts, are salvageable and will be very helpful. Still, what we need next, and what we have to work with, is going to be different.

We're going to miss this boat, how our congregation used to be. We might be tempted just to stay here, amid the wreckage, and talk about what it used to be like. We might

¹ Suzanne Simard, [Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest](#) (Toronto ON: Penguin Canada, 2021). See also Simard's websites, suzannesimard.com and mothertreeproject.org.

wish we were back up there. Some might try to go back, but there is no going upriver.

I feel this. This is a time to grieve.

The river is still going. We still have travelling to do, together. Can we?

IV

Back to that tree. Us. Uprooted.

No. We have not been uprooted. Not necessarily. It depends what we're been rooted in.

Let's hear the prophet Jeremiah. His people were facing a mortal danger. What would they do? Well, where do you root your trust?

From Jeremiah 17.

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.*

*The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse—
who can understand it?
I the Lord test the mind
and search the heart,
to give to all according to their ways,
according to the fruit of their doings.*

Who can understand our hearts: our motives, inclinations, wills, and passions? God looks into us, and God sees what we trust. Do we trust our programs and plans? Do we trust in God?

God-trusters are . . .

*like trees replanted in Eden,
putting down roots near the rivers—
Never a worry through the hottest of summers,
never dropping a leaf,
Serene and calm through droughts,
bearing fresh fruit every season.*

(The Message)

∨

In my imagining of us together, our church-community, our roots are what grounds us in God.

They anchor us to the One who is our firm ground. The storms we face, the waterfalls we crash over, are not easy. They are not fun. We are not going to plan or program our way out. Let's tend to the roots that anchor us in God.

They nourish us from living water. Jesus is our life. Living in him, following him, learning from him, cherishing him feeds us, strengthens us, nourishes us. Seasons of drought come—maybe we're in one now. These stress the tree! But a well-rooted tree survives. Let's tend to the roots that nourish us with Jesus.

They connect us to the forest. The Holy Spirit creates our tree, but not just us. This is not the time to go it alone. We can't act like we're in competition. Congregations need each other. Like trees share nutrients, we must share life with each other. Trees sound warnings, and we need to learn from each other. Let's tend to the roots that connect us to other Jesus-trees in the forest.

Next Sunday, I'll continue thinking about our roots. I'll share some things we can practice, activities that tend to the roots, that, yes, "ground" us.

Jesus talks about how vital it is that we abide in him. Abiding is about living, staying, resting, belonging, being-with. Jesus brings you into the abiding presence of God, the life of God. Our roots nourish, anchor, and connect our life together, our life together with God.

Yes, I keep on mixing metaphors. After this waterfall, our journey along this river continues, together in Christ. And no, we are not uprooted.

Amen.