

"Trunk & Branches"

Fifth in a series on Being a Tree of Life

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

Matthew 13.31-32

February 13, 2022

Jesus told another parable to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and planted in his field. It's the smallest of all seeds. But when it's grown, it's the largest of all vegetable plants. It becomes a tree so that the birds in the sky come and nest in its branches."¹

I've never paid much attention to trees. Now I'm trying to catch up. After all, there are some 3 trillion of them. That's a bit less than 400 for each of us . . . but they're not for us, though. God made trees 350 million years before gracing creation with our presence. Trees might question that decision. In the blink of an old forest's eye, we've cut their population in half.²

In the Bible, the most mentioned creature is . . . us. Trees come in second.³ I'm sure that if the Bible was for trees, they would have placed higher. But it seems they don't need it. Maybe they can teach us something.

So this winter, I've been learning from trees. In particular, what they teach us about being Jesus-communities, congregations of his people in these hard times.

I started us off with leaves and fruit. They stand for the healing and nourishment we have to share, our mission with Christ Jesus in our neighbourhoods and with our neighbours, our life for the world. How do we live in God's love for people and all creatures (like trees) around us?

Then I went from top to bottom. Our roots ground, connect, and nourish us in God's love. They are our life together with God, our abiding in Christ. How do we live in God's love for us?

What about the middle, our trunk and branches? I imagine this standing for our community together, our being-with each other in our congregations. We are a body of Christ. How do we live in God's love for one another?

¹ Common English Bible

² Wikipedia contributors, "Tree," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree (accessed February 12, 2022). The genus *homo* has been around about 2 million years, with modern human (*homo sapiens*) existing for no more than 300,000 years. I used a human population 8 billion, though it's currently a bit less than that. Agriculture began about 12,000 years ago, which began the decline in tree populations.

³ The Bible Project, "Tree of Life video notes." bibleproject.com/explore/video/tree-of-life

II

Can we? Is our tree in trouble?

Fewer than 70% of our neighbours claim a connection with *any* religious tradition. That's the lowest it's ever been.⁴ For those under 40, it's less than 1/3. More than 1/2 *never* take part in religious activities. This covers all Canadians, of all religious beliefs or none.

Let's get more specific. When I was 15, about 1 in 6 of our neighbours affiliated with the United Church of Canada. When I turned 50, it was less than 1 in 25. And that's just "affiliation." Far fewer actually connect with us and share in our life together.

All that was before the pandemic!

Will we have a life together? Is our trunk dying? Dead?

I don't think so. Because we are a tree of *Jesus'* life.

III

What does a tree-trunk do?

I read this.

*The main purpose of the trunk is to raise the leaves above the ground, enabling the tree to overtop other plants and outcompete them for light. It also transports water and nutrients from the roots to the aerial parts of the tree, and distributes the food produced by the leaves to all other parts, including the roots.*⁵

Sure. The trunk and branches raise the leaves high and move food between them and the roots. But is that their "main purpose?"

Don't the branches and trunk have some worth in themselves? Aren't they the tree? Look outside! Not so many leaves. Still lots of trees. Look at their roots. You can't. They are buried. Still, you see trees: trunks and branches. It seems to me they are the heart of the tree, the basic structure of the tree. Trunk and branches make it a tree.

⁴ Ashleigh Stewart, "Gone by 2040: Why some religions are declining in Canada faster than ever," Global News (January 8, 2022). globalnews.ca/news/8471086/religion-decline-canada. The article uses statistics from Statistics Canada's study, "Religiosity in Canada and its evolution from 1985 to 2019." <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/211028/dq211028b-eng.htm>.

⁵ Wikipedia contributors, "Tree," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tree#Trunk (accessed February 12, 2022). Emphasis added.

What does this say about us?

IV

Our life together, within our Jesus-congregations, matters for its own sake.

Yes, we produce fruit and leaves to serve others. Without our mission beyond ourselves, we wither and die. And yes, our roots sink us deep into God. Without being nourished in God, we wither and die.

Nonetheless, our trunk and branches, our life-together, is not *just* so we can band together to serve others. It's not *just* so we can join together in spiritual things. Our church-congregation, our Jesus-community, is valuable *in itself*.

When Jesus got started, what did he do? He formed a community. Ever since, he's been forming communities. So many communities are fractured — families, workplaces, neighbourhoods, nations. God's setting-things-right work has to include communities. In fact, that's what Jesus seems to start with: making communities where we can learn and practice how to be together in God-shaped ways.

Don't think I am naive. My life is absorbed in Jesus-communities — our congregations. I know they are far from perfect. But that doesn't seem to stop Jesus from using the likes of us, and our sometimes-difficult life together, as theatres for his work. He claims us as his own, trunks and branches of his life.

Our life together, our congregations, matter a huge amount. Even though they are not so big, and probably getting smaller.

V

Like a mustard seed.

Really tiny.⁶ But it grows big! There's debate about whether mustard is a bush, plant or a tree.⁷ It can be all 3, depending what kind of mustard you have in mind. The mustard known to Jesus and his first listeners strikes me as a big bush.⁸ Jesus wasn't giving a botany lecture, though. He was teaching us something important.

⁶ Mustard seeds "were proverbially known for their small size, even though other seeds, such as the orchid or cypress, were known to be smaller." [Snodgrass 220]

⁷ See www.fallsgarden.com/is-mustard-a-plant-bush-or-a-tree. Jesus' parable is recorded in Matthew, Mark, and Luke's Gospels. Mark calls it a garden plant (*lachanon*), Luke calls it a tree (*dendron*), and Matthew calls it both.

⁸ The species native to Israel is *brassica nigra*, or black mustard, so named because of the colour of its seeds.

A thing so small, can become a vital place of shelter. A tiny seed, so very, very small and unimpressive. It can produce a huge effect. A tiny seed, which birds would easily eat without a thought, can grow into a shelter for them to nest under.

VI

As we think about us, going forward . . . as we imagine how to tend to our trunk and branches, our congregational life together . . . it will help if we ask the right questions.

"How big are we?," and "Are we getting smaller?" and "How can we grow?" can be good questions. We need to pay attention to these things.

But might these be more important questions? *No matter our size, are we a congregation-community where people find shelter? Where all sorts of folk can nest? Where they are nourished? Where they are protected?*

Let me make a not-so-bold prediction. (It's not bold, because me and our other Elora and Bethany leaders are already talking about these things.) In the next while, you'll be hearing serious questions and worried concerns about our resources. Our money. Our time. Our energy.

Do we have enough money to cover our expenses? (No.) Do our people have enough time to give, so we can do everything we want to do? (No.) Or energy? (No.) We have to talk about these things.

But they are not who we are. Our identity does not rest on our resources. If we focus on them, we'll be worn out, depressed, and done.⁹

Our resources are not who we are. It's our relationships that make us who we are.

We are our relationships, our life together in our Jesus-congregation. We are our relationships, our sheltering together and welcoming others to shelter too.

VII

Jesus works on us through our relationships. For that to happen, small might be better.

The church is dying! Some say that with delight, others with despair. Maybe *dying* is not what's happening, though.

⁹ Andy Root offers a very helpful analysis of churches and their race for resources, and how this race is unwinnable and dispiriting. He says, "A congregation becomes depressed when its identity continues to rest on its resources *instead of relationships*." Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 2021), 234.

Could it be that Jesus is right-sizing us?

We're small. Maybe getting smaller. Maybe we're supposed to be small. Jesus works well with the small, insignificant, and unsensational. Us.

What matters is not the size, but that the seed is alive.

And that people find shelter, us together beneath these branches, holding tight against this trunk.

Amen.